



## THE POWER OF PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

by

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*"Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel."*

- Socrates

*"Education is far too important to be left in the hands of the schools."*

- My Mother

"How can my child be getting an adequate preparation for school when she spends so much time just playing?"

Like many other parents of young children, you may find yourself asking this question on occasion. After all, we live in a competitive, constantly changing world, so it is essential to give your child every possible advantage right from the start. And recent research clearly indicates that success in school - and in life - is heavily dependent on an abundance of appropriate educational experiences during the critical early years. So is it wise to let your child have too much fun?

Fortunately, research also indicates that for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, "having fun" and "learning" are one and the same. It is through productive and pleasurable play activities that young children build wide and firm foundations for later academic achievement. And it is through such activities that

they develop the broad concepts and general skills that enable them to master whatever specific challenges they may encounter in the years to come.

Therefore, as you peruse and pursue programs and activities for your little one, always keep in mind the following basic principles derived from the most reliable and reputable research on learning during the early years:

“LEARNING TO LEARN” IS THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON OF THE EARLY YEARS. Your child was born with an incredible amount of curiosity. However, before she can learn all she wants and needs to learn, she first must learn how to learn. She must figure out how to absorb information from the environment, how to adapt her knowledge and skills to different situations, and how to solve whatever problems arise. Since every child has a unique style of learning, this cannot be achieved through instruction. But through fun, fascinating, free-form activities, your child can discover which strategies are most comfortable and effective for her.

THE LESSONS OF THE EARLY YEARS SHOULD ADDRESS THE “WHOLE CHILD.” Unlike an older student who may benefit by having specific subjects presented according to structured agenda, your young child is interested in learning about everything all of the time. The whole world is brand new and tremendously exciting to her, and she will be using all of her interactions with people and things to make as many connections as possible and to further every aspect of her development - physical, intellectual, linguistic, social, and emotional. So it is important to keep in mind that pleasurable and productive play activities provide her with a complete “smorgasbord” of learning opportunities from which she can

choose the particular types of experiences that will be most helpful and meaningful to her at any given moment.

EARLY EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROCEEDS "HORIZONTALLY" AS WELL AS "VERTICALLY." Educational development should not be viewed as climbing a ladder where reaching one rung is a signal to move immediately up to the next. Instead, it should be viewed as constructing a pyramid where the higher levels must be fully supported by the lower ones. Therefore, during the early years, your child needs to spend time making the foundations for later academic achievement as broad and solid as possible. Extensive repetition of favorite activities, along with gradual expansion and elaboration through activities with similar themes, does not indicate the idling away of precious time, but rather the accomplishment of substantial progress in building a strong and stable educational structure.

EVERY CHILD EXHIBITS A UNIQUE RATE AND PATTERN OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS DURING THE EARLY YEARS. Like sunsets, snowflakes, and other miracles of nature, no two children are exactly alike. And learning is a process, not a race. So, when it comes to educational development during the early years, it is critical to keep in mind that "different" does not automatically imply "better" or "worse" and that "equal" does not necessarily mean "identical." Some children may enjoy a particular activity a little earlier, and some may not be inclined to pursue that activity until a little later. With play, there is no schedule except the one your child sets for herself.

Remember that the easiest and most effective way to educate your child is to let her learn what she wants to learn when she wants to learn it, and that "pushing" her into an activity for which she is not quite ready ultimately will be counterproductive. As long as her individual rate and pattern of progress is

respected, learning will be thrilling and self-sustaining. Especially during the early years, it is critical that educational activities always be exciting challenges leading to personal fulfillment and should never become chores to be completed merely to obtain adult approval.

PARENTS ARE THEIR CHILD'S FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT TEACHERS. As your child's favorite playmate, you are also her favorite educator. Anxious parents often are inclined to turn over the total responsibility for their young child's educational development to professionals. However, it is critical to keep in mind that no one is better qualified to be a child's most effective educator than her own mother and father. A professional can be expected to have expertise concerning young children in general. But the ultimate expert on any individual child will always be her parents. No one else is as finely attuned to her unique rate and pattern of progress, no one else is as keenly aware of her particular interests and abilities of the moment, and no one else has her best interests closer to heart. Consequently, a program that invites and encourages a mother and father to play and learn right along with their child will invariably be far more productive than one that focuses exclusively on the child.

As the weeks, months, and years go by, your child will take incredible strides in her preparations for academic success. Eventually, she will start to benefit from more direct instruction on specific subjects in a formal setting. However, during infancy, toddlerhood, and the preschool period, it is nice to know that the most accurate way to monitor your child's educational progress is simply to note how much fun she is having.

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