

Reading, Writing and Recess

Play = Learning: How Play Motivates and Enhances Children's Cognitive and Social-Emotional Growth

edited by Dorothy G. Singer,
Roberta Michnick Golinkoff and
Kathy Hirsh-Pasek. Oxford
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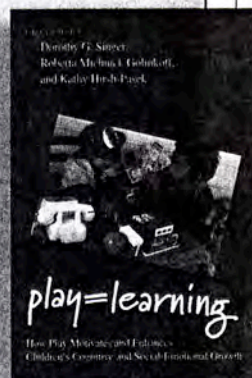
Play is under attack, argue the child development and learning experts behind this informative anthology. It is a victim of today's trend to focus on a narrow set of cognitive skills, a downed bystander of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act. What has been neglected in this rush to reinvent education, these authors say, is the huge body of research buttressing the relation between types of play, a wide range of learning and school preparedness.

Editors Dorothy G. Singer, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek lament a regression to 19th-century learning approaches, like memorization, in an era with "an emerging creative class that values conceptual knowledge and original thinking." Children must know facts, but it is ironic that teachers now emphasize rote learning at a time when information constantly changes. "The power of knowledge," they write, "comes from weaving those facts together in new and imaginative ways."

The power of this volume is its descriptions of the varieties of play—make-believe, storytelling and story-acting, mathematical—and of more than 40 years of research linking play to increased attention spans, creativity, constructive peer interaction and mental health, to list only a few benefits. The authors present surprising and often dismaying reports about recent actions that ignore the literature. We learn of an unprecedented rise in expulsions from prekindergarten classes, perhaps arising from children's frustration as they are taught skills once thought appropriate for youngsters several years older. Academic tutoring for test score gains has lasting negative consequences, according to one author, including poorer study habits and lower achievement.

The anthology grew out of a 2005 conference at Yale University funded by Fisher-Price, and editors and authors of the book have consulted for Fisher-Price and other toy manufacturers over the years. So it comes as no surprise that the book spends a little time examining what is known about the educational value of toys and videos. In a chapter on media, play, infants and toddlers, Fisher-Price manager of child research Deborah S. Weber cites studies of young children whose parents sing along and clap during, and talk to them about, age-appropriate television shows and videos. Teachers found that children who watch TV supported by this adult "scaffolding" were more ready to learn than children left to watch alone.

Though well written, the chapters of *Play = Learning* demand great concentration and challenge the educated lay reader. But it is hard to fault the authors for their thoroughness. They are serious about play and offer convincing evidence that rather than being a distraction from learning, play is the thing.



How Play Motivates and Enhances
Children's Cognitive and Social-Emotional Growth

—Karen A. Frenkel