

The Importance of Play in the Early Years

By Emily Jefford

From our earliest days, play is how we relate to the world, and to each other.

When children have plenty of opportunities to learn playfully, they do what they do best: pursue their natural curiosity and build skills and aptitudes they will keep for life. Play is one of the most important ways children learn and develop. It is as much a part of healthy development as eating fruit, story time together and having a good night's sleep. At St Catherine's, we aim to include play as an intrinsic part of the girls' education. The teachers incorporate and provide opportunities for play in and out of the classroom. The girls learn by doing rather than watching.

Through play your child will explore and investigate, watch and listen, copy and repeat, create and communicate. Play can be carried out by a child alone, with another child, in a group or with an adult. Play can be loud, can be silent, can be messy, can be quiet and relaxed. Activities such as singing, climbing, jumping, running, pretending, painting, talking and listening, are laying the foundation for future learning. When children play, no matter what it looks like, they learn.

Friedrich Froebel, an educational theorist, had firm views on play and its place in child development, believing that it fostered enjoyment, emotional well-being and was a

fundamental source of benefit. He made the distinction between play and work. Play is what children are involved in when they initiate the task, and work is what they do when they fulfil a task required by an adult.

It is a skill to enter a child's play to share the process and not dominate the play. It is knowing how and when to intervene sensitively without taking over. This may sound easy but as an adult it can be quite hard to do. Firstly, allow your child the time to think and decide what they want to play and how. Once the play has begun try to channel your inner 2 or 3-year-old and incorporate yourself into the play without being too domineering. Your role is to extend the play following their ideas but at the same time subtly introducing new concepts and language.

Play is one of the fundamentals of language development. Specifically, play helps with language because they watch, they listen, they explore, they imitate and it is fun. The symbolic stage of play from 12 months is particularly important as it is the stage where children begin to understand that one object can represent another, for example, a box can be a bed for a teddy. This is essentially what words are, a means to represent an object, thought, idea or action.

Play also supports social interaction, which is another fundamental of language development. So much of communication is based on body language, posture, facial expression,

and conversational skills such as the to and fro nature of conversation, remaining on topic, negotiating and justifying. Developing these skills through play is crucial as it is much harder to teach these skills explicitly.

So play provides an ideal opportunity to teach your child language and develop their vocabulary, concept knowledge, grammar and the sounds used in words. Play provides an environment which is rich in motivation, experience and social reward and hence stimulates the development of language.

Children's play is incredible. It's imaginative, spontaneous and exploratory. As adult play is generally more timed, rule-based and competitive, for example, sports and board games, this means it can be hard to join in with a child's play in the same way another child would. Most important is that we step back as adults and whilst we need to create the right environment for play to happen and to join in sensitively, that we give children the time to think and decide what they want to play and how.

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Open Mornings: Thursday 10th March, Friday 6th May, Friday 10th June.

