

Let Them Play

Let Them Play

AN EARLY LEARNING
(UN)CURRICULUM

**Jeff A. Johnson
and Denita Dinger**

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To my children, Myah and Landon, as well as my day care kids. They have been the best teachers I could ever ask for, reminding me daily to slow down, enjoy, and appreciate the learning in unplanned moments.

—Denita

To my mom, Lynn Johnson, for buying me those wooden blocks and then letting me play.

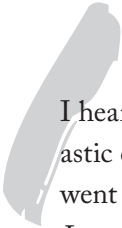
—Jeff

Contents

Foreword by Lisa Murphy, Ooey Gooley, Inc.	ix
Preface	xiii
Acknowledgments	xv
Chapter 1: What Happened to “Go Play”?	1
Play-Focused Learning	5
What Happened to “Go Play”?	11
Why the Rush?	16
Is Rushing Worthwhile?	20
Where Are We Rushing To?	22
Chapter 2: Defining an (Un)Curriculum	25
What an (Un)Curriculum Is Not	27
Characteristics of an (Un)Curriculum	28
Push the Curriculum Back Up	48
Chapter 3: Supporting an (Un)Curriculum	51
Trust Your Employees	52
Focus on Art	56
Truly Value Play	59
Encourage Activist Caregivers	60
Overcome Fear	62
Seek Out Simplicity	65
Value Vacation Mind-Sets	68
Chapter 4: Creating Engaging Spaces	77
<i>Happy</i> BRAINS	80
<i>Engaged</i> SENSES	81
<i>Safe</i> DANGER	84
<i>Abundant</i> TIME	87

	<i>Unbridled</i> CHITCHAT	89
	<i>Predictable</i> CHANGE	90
	<i>Thoughtful</i> STIMULATION	91
	<i>Appropriate</i> CHALLENGE	94
	<i>Real</i> WORK	95
	<i>Perpetual</i> MOTION	96
Chapter 5:	Trusting Kids to Learn	99
	Emotional Environments	100
	Trusting Children	113
Chapter 6:	(Un)Planning	143
	Throw Away Your Lesson Plan Book	149
	Be an Early Learning Experience Architect	153
	Practice the Principles of (Un)Planning	154
Chapter 7:	Taking Baby Steps	179
	Denita’s Story	180
	Experiment and Shake Things Up	192
Chapter 8:	Tests, Evaluations, and Assessments . . . Oh My!	201
	Don’t Feed the Beast	205
	Assess and Evaluate This	207
	Trust Children’s Self-Assessment and Self-Evaluation	207
	Document	210
	Do Something with Documentation	213
References	217
Suggested Reading	219
Suggested Websites and Blogs	223

Foreword



I heard about Jeff Johnson long before I met him, when an enthusiastic conference attendee told me, “He’s like a male Bev Bos!” She went on to say that Jeff was the coauthor of *Do-It-Yourself Early Learning*, a book filled with great ideas for things you could make yourself with just a couple visits to your local home improvement store—to which I replied, “OMG! I just ordered that book!” I’d ordered it because I was intrigued by the slightly punk–DIY connection, and I thought it would be cool to have some of that *l’esprit du punk* in an early childhood environment. And though I loved the book, my respect for Jeff deepened not when he taught me how to make a swamp in my sensory tub or launch ping-pong balls using a homemade catapult, but when I read these words of his: “Children are curious, not suicidal.” I knew immediately that anyone who had the chutzpah to put pen to paper to write and publish such a bold (and true!) statement was destined to become a friend and colleague of mine. And I’m proud to say he has.

When Jeff asked me to write the foreword for his new book, which he coauthored with Denita Dinger, I was honored and amazed—and then the fear and intimidation moved in. Just what had I committed to? What would I say? This was their rodeo, after all. How do you even write a foreword? Give me guidelines! Give me instructions! (And this I requested of a dude who keeps dead squirrels in jars and brings them to dinner if you ask him nicely.) Jeff said he trusted me to write what I needed to say. So I thank him for his trust and the opportunity, and I am grateful for his supportive team at Redleaf Press, who said they’d help me clean up my

writing style, chock-full of run-on sentences and lacking appropriate punctuation.

In *Let Them Play*, which I affectionately refer to as the (un) curriculum book, Jeff and Denita encourage providers in both center and family child care programs to stretch their willingness to engage in honest self-reflection and really examine what they call “curriculum.” They invite you to go deeper than simply claiming to be play based. They invite you to become play *obsessed*.

Now it’s no secret that Jeff probably asked me to do this foreword because he knows that I’m already play obsessed to the core. In fact, I joked to my husband after reading the manuscript, “Well, shoot! Jeff and Denita have just saved me a helluvalotta of time! Because of this [waves manuscript in air], I won’t need to write my next book!” And while there are many resources out there that can help early childhood educators take the leap from traditional to emergent curriculum, what I really appreciate about this book is that Jeff and Denita honor the fact that we all have various starting spots, that we’re all at various points in our journey toward being more play obsessed. Jeff and Denita value baby steps and understand that becoming play obsessed is definitely a process.

The industry of early childhood education is filled with T-shirt slogans and bumper-sticker dogma: “Set the stage and facilitate!” “Be a guide on the side, not a sage on the stage!” We can all wear a “My program is play obsessed!” T-shirt, but only those of us who are willing to go deep and examine what we call “our program” will reap the true benefits of the investigative, introspective, hard work we do. *Let Them Play* will guide you on your investigative journey and show you how to push beyond the T-shirt slogan. The authors name-drop at the right moments to reinforce their position statements, and they provide a plethora of suggested readings that will keep many of us busy through to next year. But it’s the manageable chunks of information that ultimately make *Let Them Play* a valuable resource for me. Examples include

- The four results of fear and hypersurveillance (page 64)

- The five elements of a truly child-centered program (pages 41–42)
- Three advocacy tips (pages 48–49)
- The seven programming guidelines that make an (un)curriculum possible (page 52)
- Five reasons society has lost faith in saying, “Go play” (pages 12–15)
- Eight reasons to throw away your lesson-planning books (pages 150–151)
- Nine problems with boxed, preplanned curriculums (page 16)
- The twelve principles of brain-based learning (page 31)
- The six characteristics of an (un)curriculum (page 29)
- The ten principles of physical spaces that permit children to be the boss of their own learning (page 79)

Depending on where you were trained, where you went to school, who mentored you, and what bandwagon the USA was riding when you cut your early childhood teeth, Jeff and Denita’s message might be affirming or frightening. When I first started teaching and working in child care centers, I was told, “*This* is the theme. Now go plan activities that fit it.” There’s nothing wrong with predetermined themes, but there’s a lot wrong with how they’re often implemented: talking about XYZ topic Monday through Friday come hell or high water even if it has no context or relevancy to the children in the room. As I grew and was exposed to emergent curriculum, I started planning for the bones of the day but moved away from the themes. I started paying attention, observing, and using what I was seeing the children do as fodder and inspiration for deeper investigation. I played with language, and “theme” morphed into “projects”; “lesson planning” turned into “documentation and observations.”

It can take time to change minds. We must be patient with ourselves, our programs, and our children. We must trust the process.

We must trust the children. We must trust our ability to create an appropriate and engaging environment. And finally, we must trust ourselves. Then and only then will we start moving to the sidelines of children’s lives, which, as Anna Quindlen says, is “where we belong if we do our jobs right.”


Lisa Murphy
Early Childhood Specialist
CEO and Founder
of Ooey Gooley, Inc.



Lisa Murphy, BS, CEO and Founder of Ooey Gooley, Inc., has been involved in many aspects of early childhood education for over twenty years. She is the author of four books and conducts hundreds of training seminars each year. Like Denita and Jeff, Lisa encourages you to become play obsessed!

Use your smartphone to scan this QR code to visit Lisa's website, or go to www.ooeygooley.com.

Preface



Over the last couple of decades, the world has changed and the early years have become too important and serious for mere child's play. We live in a world of prenatal curriculums and high-pressure preschools; a world where there's no longer time for dramatic play or recess; a world where childhood is rushed through and play is replaced by flash cards and worksheets. A January 2012 American Academy of Pediatrics article, published online, concludes its abstract by saying, "Societal priorities for young children—safety and school readiness—may be hindering children's physical development" (Copeland et al. 2012, 1). We believe they go farther than that. We believe these "societal priorities" are also hindering emotional, cognitive, and social development. The push for safety and academic learning, while well intentioned, has had unintended consequences. It has resulted in sterile, boring, and passionless early childhood programs that fail to trust children as learners. In the article, the authors say they were surprised to find that a "societal focus on 'academics' extended even to the preschool-aged group" they studied (Copeland et al. 2012, 6).

We were not surprised.

Anyone who has worked with children over the last few decades can share stories about the push toward formal academics—and away from play—in early learning programs. The loss of play is detrimental for all children, especially those living in poverty. Another American Academy of Pediatrics article, originally published online in December 2011, states, "For children who are underresourced to reach their highest potential, it is essential that parents, educators, and pediatricians recognize the importance of lifelong benefits that children gain from play" (Milteer and Ginsburg 2011, e204). That article concludes by saying,

“School systems are focused on overcoming their academic deficiencies in a safe environment often at the expense of time for arts, recess, physical education classes, and after-school activities that include playing, despite evidence that supports that what happens in play contributes substantially to social and emotional learning, even in the classroom” (Milteer and Ginsburg 2011, e210).

The slow but steady shift from play to academics may seem harmless in its increments, but it has negatively affected children’s curiosity, creativity, social skills, self-regulation, problem-solving skills, knowledge of the world, and so much more. And let’s not forget about fun. The rush through childhood and the push toward academics are sucking the fun out of childhood quicker than a five-year-old can suck the filling out of a Twinkie.

We don’t like this world.

Let Them Play is our way of countering these changes and putting more filling into the Twinkie. We wrote *Let Them Play* to show caregivers of young children another way, a way that embraces play, trusts children as learners, and values childhood. We call this alternative to the current academic push an *(un)curriculum*, because it is built on a solid foundation of research and real-world experience, and it is also the antithesis of what currently happens in many early learning programs. In preparing to write the book, we read a lot and talked to hundreds of parents and caregivers in both center- and family-based programs. We also called on our own experiences as parents and professional caregivers. Between the two of us, we have over thirty years of down-on-the-floor-with-the-kids experience, the result of which is this book, based on scientific research and full of real-life examples of how to support child-led and play-based learning.

Our biggest hope is that the ideas and stories we share in *Let Them Play* will help you kindle a renewed passion for early learning, value play, and push back against the changes that are eroding away the best of childhood.



Use your smartphone to scan this QR code to visit our *Let Them Play* Facebook page, or go to www.facebook.com/LetThemPlayBook, where we continue the conversation about the importance of play.

Acknowledgments

We would both like to acknowledge Linda Hein and the great people at Redleaf Press who made this book possible: David Heath, Kyra Ostendorf, Laurie Herrmann, JoAnne Voltz, Inga Weberg, Paul Bloomer, Douglas Schmitz, Jim Handrigan, Carla Valadez, Heidi Hogg, Devin Kormanik, Renee Hammes, Eric Johnson, Shaun Ward, Cindy Haider, and Steven Rhoden. Oh, and Janet Ward. If you're reading this book, then it's because Janet made sure it was safely shipped.

Thanks to Beth Wallace for your fresh eyes and mindful editing. You're awesome.

Thanks to all the early learning professionals who shared stories, opinions, photos, and ideas. We don't have room to name you all here, but your experience, thoughtfulness, and dedication to children have been inspiring.

All of these people are Artists, not Cogs.

I would like to thank my husband for his unfailing support while I chase my dreams. I would also like to acknowledge "my Jenn" for all the times she's let me bounce ideas off of her, vent, cry, and laugh. She's been the best gift any family child care provider could ask for. Finally, I give a huge thank-you to Jeff for offering me the opportunity of a lifetime.

—Denita

A special thanks to my wife, Tasha, for putting up with all those random moments when my eyes darted up and off to the side as I contemplated, wrestled with, and composed this book in my head. Thanks to Denita for being just as bullheaded and opinionated as I am. Thanks to the Big Island and Starbucks 9602. I also need to thank my early learning buddy, Sue Erpelding of Providers Empowering Providers in Wyoming, for letting me delay projects I was working on for her to make time for this book.

—Jeff



Use your smartphone to scan this QR code to visit Denita's website, or go to www.playcounts.com.



Use your smartphone to scan this QR code to visit Jeff's website, or go to www.explorationearlylearning.com.





What Happened to “Go Play”?

Neuroscientists, developmental biologists, psychologists, social scientists, and researchers from every point of the scientific compass now know that play is a profound biological process. It has evolved over eons in many animal species to promote survival. It shapes the brain and makes animals smarter and more adaptable. In higher animals, it fosters empathy and makes possible complex social groups. For us, play lies at the core of creativity and innovation.

—Stuart Brown with Christopher Vaughan, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*

“Jeff, can I eat snack later? School was tough today, and I need to play for a while before I eat.”

—Jack, age five, after his third day of kindergarten

Play is not frivolous. It is not a luxury. It is not something to fit in after completing all the important stuff. Play *is* the important stuff. Play is a drive, a need, a brain-building must-do. It hardwires us as much as it centers us. It feeds our intellect as much as our imagination. It builds knowledge as much as empathy. It connects neurons, and it connects ideas. We could not be fully human without it. Yet good-intentioned people with legitimate social concerns are rushing children through

their childhoods, pushing developmentally inappropriate practices, and preventing children from their most important task: playing.

Let's look at what happened to Gabby:

Gabby sits in the middle of an old oak floor feeding a naked baby doll with a wooden block. Her legs crossed in front of her, she sways gently. A scabbed left knee—an apple tree climbing injury—pokes from under her brown and pink dress. Her bare toes wiggle the tune she is humming. After burping her baby with gentle back pats, she kisses its forehead and tucks it into a tattered shoe box for a nap. Gabby then tippy-toes silently to the other side of the room, where she helps another child prepare an imaginary magic princess banquet, talking in hushed tones while stirring bowls of make-believe cookie batter and grilling pretend steak. After the party, Gabby builds a house of wooden blocks and scraps of cardboard for a family of plastic cows; she reads a few favorite books to herself (she has had them memorized for months); she counts tiny plastic bugs (“one, two, three, seven, nine, eleven”); she argues loudly with a friend over who had a stuffed duck first; she eats lunch without spilling her milk much; she sleeps; she climbs the apple tree again, this time without falling.

Three-year-old Gabby spends her days busy at play. She is in charge of her curriculum, fluttering from activity to activity as her interests change. Gabby's caregiver maintains a strong emotional environment, provides a rich and varied physical environment, supports the interests of the children in her care, and gives them as much autonomy as they can manage. She does her best to step back and let the children guide their own learning. To the untrained eye, Gabby's play looks chaotic, but her hands-on engagement with the environment is focused, purposeful, and full of learning. She is mastering her body, learning language, honing social skills, thinking creatively, and making cognitive leaps as she stacks blocks and rocks dolls. She is a learning machine out to understand the world and her place in it.

Gabby's mother, however, feels a lot of pressure from her friends (who are also mothers of young children) to enroll Gabby in an academic preschool program to make sure she'll be ready to start learning in kindergarten. And while Jenny thinks her daughter is a bright bulb,

she doesn't have a lot of proof; after all, Gabby spends all her time “just playing” in her current provider's program, and the academic preschool advertises “an academic curriculum designed to prepare students for school,” which placates Jenny's fears. The academic program promises regular evaluations and even tests Gabby before enrolling her.

Gabby begins attending the new program three days a week for three hours each day. Her time there is broken up into chunks of no more than thirty minutes, which means numerous transitions and no time for self-directed free play. Initially Gabby is in a classroom with other three-year-olds, but in less than a month, she turns four and is moved to another room with another set of kids and teachers. Self-confident, curious, apple tree-climbing Gabby keeps to herself. Every once in a while, she tosses a fit for her mother and begs to “go back to Miss Cindy's house.” Jenny writes these changes off as part of growing up.

In a syrupy, singsong voice, one of the four part-time caregivers staffing Gabby's new preschool classroom explains to ten fidgety children exactly where on the construction paper frogs they should glue the googly eyes so the frogs will be pretty. “If it's pretty,” she says, “then your mommy will like it and hang it up.” Gabby seems lost. She's not used to being still for so long. She's not used to this sort of boxed curriculum, to precut project pieces, and to having so little control over her time and energy. She makes a sea of glue on the frog's chest, dips the googly eyes into the glue, and places one on the frog's front left foot and the other on the center of its face. Then she jumps out of her chair and frog-hops across the room to the baby dolls. She is scolded and placed in time-out, where—still in frog mode—she tries to catch a passing fly with her tongue. When she gets up, it's free time, but not the kind of “free” she's used to. She and a redheaded boy who was also in time-out are assigned to the block area. They have to put in fifteen minutes of free time there before they can move to the dramatic play area, and then, after another fifteen minutes, they get to use the playdough. They try to sneak a couple of big yellow trucks into the block area from the car area but are told that today the trucks aren't allowed with the blocks. Gabby and the redheaded boy are scolded for not listening, and then they start building a block tower. It's a sturdy tower

on a strong foundation, and soon they need to drag a chair over to keep building—and then they find themselves back in time-out for making such a tall, “dangerous” structure.

What passes as child’s play in many early learning programs today is planned, regulated, organized, supervised, and documented by adults to the point that the lightheartedness, spontaneity, and freedom that define childhood no longer exist. Gabby went from hours of autonomous play every day to an environment that was so overly controlled and regimented that her free time was planned out for her. Her curiosity and creativity went from being nurtured to being punished. The pilfering of Gabby’s play-based learning was not malicious: everyone in her life wanted the best for her. Still, the unrelenting and misguided push for early academics and school achievement took away the autonomy and joy from Gabby’s learning. The new environment transformed her from a child eager for self-discovery and new experiences into an unsure and timid little girl. Gabby learned that she could avoid time-out and scoldings by gluing the frog eyes where the teacher said to glue them, by *not* taking initiative, and by *not* being creative. After a few months in the new program, Gabby seemed . . . diminished.

On her first day of kindergarten, Gabby is excited and nervous. She has a bright new pair of Mary Janes and a scuff-free backpack, and her long hair spills like a fountain from the top of her head. She has reason to be nervous: the school district expects Gabby to know today what her mom knew at the end of kindergarten, because the curriculum has been accelerated. There will be more worksheets and tests for Gabby; not as much art, music, gym, and recess as her mom had; and little time for play. The magical playhouse that anchored the kindergarten classroom for a generation has been removed to make way for three computers. The dress-up clothes, kitchen supplies, dolls, and building blocks went with it. The kindergarten teacher says she knows the school is pushing kids too hard. “I feel it in my bones,” she says. Gabby’s teacher would like her students to have more time to play, but she is under local, state, and federal pressure to make sure the kids in her class achieve certain learning benchmarks—whether they are developmentally ready or not.

Gabby feels the pressure, too, and she senses her teacher’s stress. Some days her tummy hurts and she begs to stay home. Her lips are red and badly chapped from nervous licking—a condition that magically clears up during school breaks.

What if Gabby’s mom hadn’t felt so worried and pressured to move Gabby to an academic program? What if Gabby had stayed with Miss Cindy and had been allowed to “just play” until it was time for her to start kindergarten? What if her kindergarten teacher had been able to allow the children in her class to learn through play, as so many earlier generations of kindergartners had? What if parents, caregivers, and early educators shifted their mind-sets and *really* trusted play as a teacher and *really* trusted children as capable learners?

Childhood has changed. Listen to one parent and teacher we questioned for this book, who grew up in the 1950s:

One of my most vivid memories [of childhood] is playing “Wagon Train” with neighborhood children. Backyard Adirondack chairs were our wagons. We wore discarded adult garments as our dress-up clothes and picked berries and leaves to make mud pies. We stayed outdoors for hours, going in only to eat lunch or use the bathroom. We got along, and if there was a problem, we settled our own disputes without fights. We used our imaginations and were very creative.

Mary and her playmates were given freedom to play on their own for hours at a time. They decided how to spend their time and engage the world. Along the way, they built strong bodies, learned to solve problems, developed social skills, flexed their imaginations, grew their intellects, and had a ton of fun. Encouraging such play-focused learning is a core goal of this book.

Play-Focused Learning

Play is an inborn learning strategy. When asked why play is important, Peter Gray, research professor of psychology at Boston College and author of the *Freedom to Learn* blog at www.psychologytoday.com, responded, “Can you imagine life without play? How dreary it would be.



Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The pursuit of happiness is play. Moreover, play is how we learn, how we make friends, how we find meaning in life.”

Many people know that play is not what it used to be. We surveyed over a hundred parents, professional caregivers, and child advocates from three continents, seeking their stories, thoughts, and feelings about play and early learning. When we asked them to compare childhood today with their own childhoods, some common ideas emerged:

- **Children have less autonomy.**

“Children’s lives today are much more scheduled.”

“Children are so limited in what they can do and think.”

“I had much, much more freedom.”

“The type of freedom I had as a child doesn’t exist for children today.”

- **Play has changed.**

“I often wonder if our kids are missing out on some of the opportunities to be creative and explore on their own because of our schedules and structured activities.”

"When I was a kid, there was real play."

"Imaginative play is not fostered."

"[There is] less outside play and pretend play for the majority of children."

"Play was respected just as much as schoolwork."

"There's not a lot of creative, imaginative play. When I was growing up, we didn't have all of the realistic toys. We had to improvise."

"We had some toys, sure, like Barbie—but they were more open-ended then. Now everything is press a button and make a noise. And the marketers are telling parents that pressing a button will make their kids smarter. It's a lie."

"Children today don't play with mud pies or dig up worms or make kites from junk."

"I think kids today are too regimented, running from activity to activity with no time to just be."



- **Adults are more fearful.**

“With today’s safety issues, it’s not possible to send kids outside and tell them to be home for lunch. But some of my fondest memories are of going exploring and playing by the creek.”

“Children are not left alone, [so] they are not making and learning from their own mistakes because [an adult is] right there to fix it.”

“I don’t think it is any more dangerous, but there is always doubt and someone to blame if something happens.”

“I panic if my daughter’s school bus is late.”

“I think society is so fearful today that children miss the simple things, such as climbing trees, and are not allowed to be independent. The rules and regulations abounding in child care don’t allow for exploration and learning from mistakes.”

“Today you are too scared to let your kids go out on their own.”

- **Children grow up faster.**

“[Children] start sports, dance, and school so much earlier, they aren’t allowed to be children.”

“Our kids are being asked to grow up too fast. I keep telling mine to be kids as long as they can. If that means dressing up or playing with dolls, do it—do what you feel desire to do. It’s not right that ten-year-olds have to worry about ‘being cool’ so they can’t play with dolls anymore, and dress-up is only cool if you’re dressing up like Hannah Montana.”

“I think girls’ inappropriate clothing and makeup is starting at an earlier age. I remember my first thing of makeup was clear mascara in seventh grade!”

“Today’s children are under a lot more pressure to perform, either at school or in sports, ballet, etc.”

- **Modern kids are more sedentary; electronics have replaced outside play.**

“Outside play until the streetlights came on was common.”

"I definitely had more opportunities to play outside with little or no supervision."

"Children don't play outdoors as much. They seem to prefer television and video games."

"Outdoor and imaginative play seemed to be more abundant."

"We get kids hooked on TV and computers from birth, but we're not outside playing and having picnics and exploring the world."

But perhaps it's just a case of fond memories clouding clear thinking. We humans tend to have overly fond memories of our own childhoods; we gloss over the bad bits and glorify the good. Viewing the past through rose-tinted glasses is nothing new. Back in 10,000 BCE, little Ogg Jr. sat by the campfire playing with a stack of smooth, glossy rocks while his parents, Bunny and Ogg Ogger-son Sr., reminisced about how much better the dingy, pointy rocks of their childhoods were. It's human nature to think everything was better back in the day.

On the other hand, many of the people we surveyed shared the dark parts of their early years too. We heard stories of abuse, poverty, divorce, and other trauma. While nobody had a perfect childhood, it is clear that some things have changed. One big difference is that Bunny and Ogg, Mary, and the others quoted above survived their early childhoods without a formal curriculum defining the course for their learning. These folks were born wired for play, they played unmonitored and free, and they learned. For most of them, adult



involvement in their early learning ended with two words: “Go play.” The curriculum for their early years was an *(un)curriculum*. For most of human history, adults have been too busy avoiding saber-toothed tigers, procuring food and shelter, and creating and destroying civilizations to pay much attention to the day-to-day minutiae of their children’s lives. In his book *Childhood in World History*, Peter N. Stearns explains that for most of world history, children have been free to be children during their youngest years. They were often required to contribute to the welfare of the group at an early age, but “childhood was undoubtedly a time of play.”

Need more proof that society is hurrying childhood along? As we write, the Obama administration has states scrambling to secure a piece of the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top Fund. Let’s look at that name—Race to the Top. It implies a sense of urgency and a need to rush forward. While the race is to get “to the top,” it also implies that those who do not work hard enough will be losers left at the bottom. In the end, it draws on the same well-intentioned desire for success and fear of being unprepared for the unknowable future that are rushing childhood along. The US Department of Education (2009) website says, “Awards in Race to the Top will go to states that are leading the way with ambitious yet achievable plans for implementing coherent, compelling, and comprehensive education reform”—whatever that means. We assume that a committee of government lawyers under the influence of freeway exhaust fumes or hard liquor composed the prose on this website. We were unable to decipher the slippery and obtuse language enough to understand exactly *why* there is a race and precisely *what* everyone is racing to the top of.

This fund could bring positive change in our schools, and we hope it does. Only time will tell. We do know that the name is scary and that the government’s track record is not great when it comes to improving education. The quality of education in our public schools has not changed much over the last few decades, but spending has shot up like the blood pressure of a senator confronted by angry citizens at a town hall meeting.

While per pupil funding has more than doubled since the 1970s, similar gains in student achievement have not followed with increasing federal funding for education (Lips, Watkins, and Fleming 2008). Past

efforts at education reform have not met with much success. No Child Left Behind has pushed the elementary curriculum into preschools to the point that three-year-olds are expected to behave and achieve like five-year-olds, and Head Start has morphed from focusing on social competence to emphasizing academics. This time around things could be different, but we aren't going to hold our breath.

What Happened to "Go Play"?

It appears that (mostly) well-meaning experts have convinced us that the child-created (un)curriculums that served humankind so well for so long are something to be feared. Too many parents have been convinced by experts that letting Bobby and Briana make mud pies, splash in puddles, stack blocks, and baby baby dolls will not prepare them for school, or work, or marriage, or life, or whatever it is children are being prepared for. Society is afraid that little Bobby and Briana will end up slack jawed and stupid if it fails to map out learning objectives and prepare lesson plans for every minute of every day. Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner write in *Freakonomics*,



Armed with information, experts can exert a gigantic, if unspoken, leverage: fear. . . . No one is more susceptible to an expert's fear mongering than a parent. Fear is in fact a major component of the act of parenting. A parent, after all, is the steward of another creature's life, a creature who in the beginning is more helpless than the newborn of nearly any other species. This leads a lot of parents to spend a lot of their parenting energy simply being scared. (2009, 67, 149)

Over the last few decades, early learning and public policy activists, as well as the media, have creatively overinterpreted research in brain development to the point of farce, claiming that choices made in the early years can determine everything from future parenting skills to whether a child will start smoking as a teenager. This hype has led parents and caregivers to states of paralyzing fear, forcing them to question their every choice.

All this fear burns a lot of energy. Adults deeply and truly want what is right for children, but it's difficult to know what "right" looks like. Life can be hard, and we are inclined to believe that the deceptively simple act of playing is not enough to prepare young children for its challenges. Can stacking wooden blocks or tasting mud pie really prepare a child for life? Simply saying, "Go play," seems too easy. Society has lost faith in "Go play" for a number of reasons:

- **Adults no longer trust in the idea of play.** To some extent, just goofing around with blocks, plastic cows, or construction paper seems old-fashioned. It just doesn't seem right that something so simple can prepare a child for life in the twenty-first century. To many adults, even adults who work daily with young children, play does not look like much. Play is deceptively simple. Stepping back and seeing the vast amounts of learning that come with it are difficult.
- **Parents feel pressured.** It's hard to say, "Go play," to the child in your life when the children of peers are busy all day with scheduled activities. It's easy to think that if your kid isn't enrolled in toddler kickboxing and Mandarin lessons, then he may not have a thing to talk about during his playdates with friends. What's worse, you might have a hard time explaining your choices to the other parents in your peer group. They might think you're a bad parent, and they might talk about you when you run out to the minivan for more juice boxes. Professional caregivers and parents make a lot of choices for children not because they are good choices but because everyone else has chosen it. Giving in to the pressure and following along seem easier than fighting them.
- **Adults believe learning requires teaching.** Some adults have a hard time believing that children learn when they play because

they don't see any teaching happening. The idea that learning can happen without an adult taking the lead doesn't always make sense to grown-ups, in part because as children, they themselves spent much of their time in settings where an authoritative teacher attempted to fill their heads with knowledge. Their own schooling was built on a passive learning model, which makes the learning that happens during children's play hard for them to see.



Play is child-led, active learning. Two examples of how well children are able to lead their own learning through play, without adult teaching, are walking and talking.

Adults do not teach children to walk. Children learn to walk through play. From their earliest days, they build muscle strength and control as they playfully wiggle and roll, stretch and scoot. The progression from rolling, to scooting, to crawling, to pulling themselves up, to cruising along the edges of couches and toy boxes, to glorious first steps are all play centered. Little Claire reaches for a rattle and rolls over for the first time. Zeke crawls after a rolling ball. Dan pulls himself up to grab a baby doll from a shelf. Suki takes her first steps in pursuit of a playful kitten she wants to engage. Then, with persistent practice and lots more play, they eventually become toddlers, and soon after they become runners and skippers and hoppers and jumpers—again, with the help of more play. Picking up pine cones on a walk, exploring along a creek with Grandpa, chasing butterflies—all of these are playful activities that help unstable toddlers become proficient walkers. Learning to walk is a natural, play-based process that humanoids have experienced for millions of years.

Similarly, children acquire language through play. They babble to inanimate objects, take part in conversations with people and pets, play with rhymes and rhythms, create stories and play scenarios with peers, make games of building new vocabulary, and generally have fun acquiring language. The playful babbling, conversation, stories, and music we provide children are all a part of their play-based language acquisition, but we do not teach our babies to talk. They engage with their environments and lead their own playful learning. They babble, they repeat sounds, they imitate, they fashion first words and refine them, they play with syntax, they talk, and they talk, and they talk, until finally they manage to string a few words together. Then they listen and listen and listen and talk and talk and talk some more (and we talk and talk and talk back), until one day they are real human beings who will close the door if you ask or answer the phone for you if you're in the shower. It's like magic, except it's not. It's play. All of this learning unfolds through playful moments of listening, practicing, and repeating: Mommy singing silly songs and baby replying in rhythmic babbles. Daddy saying, "Who loves this baby sooooo much? Daddy does!" as he zerberts baby's belly. Grandma bursting into applause when baby toddles into the kitchen and asks for a cookie. Grandpa naming and explaining about plants and critters baby sees while strolling through the park. Play is a mind-set as much as it is an activity. This playful mind-set, an attitude open to experimentation and mistakes and full of curiosity and risk taking, is a powerful tool children use to learn language.

- **Society has made early childhood a competition.** The adult world can be very competitive. That competition has seeped into early childhood. Playing ball with the neighborhood kids in the backyard is no longer good enough. Now even young children have home and away uniforms, grown-up referees, manicured fields, training camps, and cheering fans. Parents don't just want their kids to do well; they want them to dominate the other kids. Going off to play does not have a place in these competitive settings.

- **Adults have lost touch with the way they themselves learn best.**

Many adults have stagnated as learners, and their reluctance to let kids go play is due in part to their feelings about their own learning. Many grown-ups have become complacent and forgotten how much fun it is to actively engage the world. Adults get stuck in ruts and routines and aren't able to remember the magic of trying new things and learning from them.

Complete the following before moving on:

Describe how you feel when your day is dictated to you by others and you have no free time to yourself.

If you had a free afternoon this week to go play, what would you do?
(Now we suggest you make some time and go play.)

What issues make it hard for you to let children go play on their own?
