Benefits of Play
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NMAIMH competencies addressed

Theoretical Foundations
- Infant & young child development and behavior

Direct Service Skills
- Observation and listening

Reflection
- Curiosity
- Professional/personal development

Children learn better through play versus primarily direct instruction because it is more meaningful and significant to them (Ebert, 2009). When children play, they are discovering how things function, which is an avenue for learning. Many times, teaching and therapy can become inflexible with the concentration on finishing a task, without enough play. One benefit of play is that it can happen anywhere and anytime with a child (Lerner and Parlakian, 2009). Also, we need to take into consideration using the child’s natural environment to create an enjoyable and successful learning experience, so that these skills can be generalized, based on activities within a family’s daily routines. Regardless of where a child is, we can use play as a tool to develop confidence in children and their parents as well as a way for parents to support their children’s development. As children play, they benefit and gain many skills, for example, they can improve their language skills, learn to utilize their bodies and problem solve, in addition, strengthen social development in the process (Ebert, 2009).

Through the use of symbolic play, young children begin to develop Representational Competence. According to Monighan (2007), “children develop the ability to use their imaginations to represent objects, people, and ideas.” Representational Competence is a skill that is essential for academic success later in life. An example of Representational Competence at its earliest stages would be a child crawling around barking, pretending to be a dog. In this
example, the child is using one object (his or her body to represent another object, in this example, a dog.) As children grow this skill develops and becomes used more as they progress through the higher grades. An example of this skill in the upper grades would be Algebra. However, as early as elementary school, children are taught to represent numerical values with alphabet characters to prepare them for more complex representational concepts in the future.

**Practical Examples for Parents to use at home:**

- Play with bubbles - works on language, fine/gross motor and cognitive skills
- Play with corn starch and water - works on sensory, fine motor, language and cognitive skills
- Stack blocks or stackable objects practices skills in fine motor and cognitive, as well as hand and eye coordination
- Provide children with a variety of writing tools (crayons, pens, markers, pencils) and paper so that they can practice holding a crayon, while the parent encourages the child to imitate what the parent is doing (circular strokes).
- Offer children opportunities to play and practice the pincer grasp, which is using the index finger and thumb, to pick up dry cereal and place it into a small bottle or container, alternating between each hand.
- Provide opportunities for children to practice walking around different surfaces when playing, to work on balance and to begin to detour obstacles outside like at the park or while on a nature walk.

**Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…**

- What does play mean to you? (or How do you define play?)
- Do families believe “play” is an important skill to learn?
- How could you discuss the importance of play skills with families as well as support parent-child interactions that incorporate play?

**References/Additional Resources**