Playful Learning

With all the discussions these days about children and their education, I decided to devote this newsletter to one of Fred’s central messages that you might want to share with the families of the children you serve. It’s a message that can help us feel good about simple, everyday moments — moments at home (or at school) when children are just playing.

Here’s how Fred said it: “Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children,
play IS serious learning. At various times, play is a way to cope with life and to prepare for adulthood. Playing is a way to solve problems and to express feelings. In fact, play is the real work of childhood.”

So much learning happens when children play. All through the Neighborhood series Fred talked and sang about the value of play. When you watch this video, think about all the different ways he’s encouraging play.

Here are some simple ideas for at-home pretend play that can lead to lots of fun and lots of learning. Sometimes all it takes is a prop like an empty box, a towel, maybe some paper and tape, to start a child working on:

- Making a garage or doll bed from an empty box
- Playing doctor or veterinarian with a doll or stuffed animal
- Making a birthday party or a tea party for a doll or stuffed animal
- Playing grocery store and making a pretend list and pretend money
- Lining up shoes and playing shoe store
- Setting up chairs in two rows and pretending to go on a trip
- Putting a blanket over a table to make a cozy playhouse

It’s kind of amazing to think about how many ways children’s play experiences connect with the skills they’ll need for school.

- **Play can help children grow in self-esteem** -- The most important thing children need for school learning is a good feeling about who they are, that their ideas have value, and they’re proud of what they’ve accomplished.

- **Play can help children focus their attention** – It takes a lot of thought and work to start with an idea and follow through with it. It often takes planning and organizing. As they keep their attention focused on what they’re doing, children are developing self-control and self-regulation. Think about how much it will help children in school to be able to pay attention and not get distracted.

- **Play can help children work on persistence and problem-solving** - When they create play from their ideas, children want to keep working on them, even when they’re frustrated that things aren’t quite right. Because they’re so interested in what they’re doing, they often keep working on ways to figure out a solution. They’re learning how much more they can do when they don’t give up - but keep on trying.

- **Play can help children develop their imagination** – When they pretend and imagine things, they’re becoming creative thinkers. That’s a great tool for problem-solving in school and in life. Imagination can also help children with reading comprehension. If they can picture what’s happening as they read, they’ll understand the stories better.

- **Play can help children with basic math and literacy skills** – Often their play ideas involve using math concepts, like
measurement (will it fit, is it too big, how long should I make it) or counting (how many plates for the birthday party) or pretending how much things cost. Sometimes they pretend to read to their dolls or stuffed animals. They might write or draw pretend notes or lists, signs or pretend money. That very real interest in reading, writing and math will help them want to do the hard work that it takes to learn those skills.

There’s another simple thing we can do to strengthen both the children’s play AND their learning from it – just showing them we’re interested in what they’re doing. We might want to start with something like, “What a great idea! Can you tell me about it?” or “I’d love to know more about what you were doing. What’s that part?” and then really listening, maybe even adding, “Tell me more.” And don’t forget to take a moment and just enjoy watching them having fun.

In those everyday moments, we’re telling children that their ideas matter – and more importantly, that they matter, that they’re loved and lovable. There’s no better gift we can give them for their journey ahead in school and in life.

Thank you for being our "neighbor,"

Hedda Sharapan
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PNC Grow Up Great Senior Fellow
Here’s another message from Fred that can help all of us during these times:

"Some days, doing “the best we can” may still fall short of what we would like to be able to do, but life isn’t perfect—on any front—and doing what we can with what we have is the most we should expect of ourselves or anyone else."

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