

Children Learn how to Learn Through Play

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Sahana walked into my class on a Monday and called out to her friends. She was excited about trying out a new game with her classmates. She got the idea after visiting her favourite restaurant over the weekend. Sahana explained the plan to her peers, and everyone started looking for suitable objects that were required to set up a restaurant. Wooden logs became stools, planks turned into tables, our play kitchen turned into a restaurant workspace and the little chef made a hat for her using a dupatta. The chef asked her guests what they would like to eat. Spaghetti was ordered and a plate of *idli* for the baby (a doll). The little chef giggled and used some colourful yarn to make pesto spaghetti and wooden coasters became steamed *idlis*. The children had a great time playing the game; it was also a fantastic learning experience for them.



Importance of play

Children's play, in the creative, open-ended, imaginative sense, is now seriously endangered due to early intellectualisation or focus on academic work. Children are weighed down by academics and rote learning in a conventional classroom. They are confined to classroom environments in which they are forced to read, write and engage in activities that they are not ready for and are not age-appropriate. This makes them frustrated, drained out and disinterested which can, oftentimes, result in outbursts of suppressed energy and emotions and sometimes, they are labelled as 'hyperactive'

or 'attention deficit'. On the other hand, children who learn through play and use unstructured play materials, display a range of creative ideas. They do not get bored with playing with the same open-ended play material and are able to use it in various ways to express their ingenuity and originality. They are also at ease when their mind is not engaged in play and are okay with being still and content with themselves. They are self-engaged, self-motivated, confident, creative, calm, expressive and have better attention spans.

For a primary school child (6-11 years), imagination is as important a medium for learning as make-believe play is for the pre-schooler. Through imagination and the art of storytelling, any subject can be taught and kindergarten (2-6 years) children become enthralled with learning. Without imagination, learning is not experiential and cannot be internalised. If a child has been allowed to engage in make-believe play during the kindergarten years to nurture imagination before entering grade I, he or she is then ready to learn. While individual children may have learning difficulties, their enthusiasm for learning and for overcoming difficulties is enormous.

The central importance of creative play in children's healthy development is well supported by decades of research. A study was done in the 1970s in Germany, at a time when many kindergartens were being transformed into academic rather than play-oriented environments. The study compared two groups in 50 kindergartens – one, in which children played more and another, a control group, in which children focused on early academics. The children were followed until grade IV and, at that point, the children from the play-oriented kindergartens excelled over their peers in conventional schools in every area measured—physical, emotional, social and intellectual development. The results were especially striking among lower-income children, who clearly benefited from the play-oriented approach. The overall results were so compelling that Germany switched all its kindergartens back to being play-oriented.¹ They have continued in this mode until the present time, just like schools in

Finland, which have recently become popular in the alternative education space.

The Waldorf Technique

The Waldorf Technique was an independent school movement developed in Europe a hundred years ago by an Austrian philosopher and visionary, Rudolf Steiner. This learning process is essentially threefold and engages thinking, feeling, and doing. Each child is taken through a methodology that integrates academics, arts and practical skills.ⁱⁱ The Waldorf pedagogy helps protect childhood by focusing on play as a form of learning in the early years.

At our *Tulasi Waldorf Kindergarten*, we have designed the space as an extension of the home environment and it includes activities that a child experiences in his or her house. Here children engage with everyday items like a play kitchen, handmade dolls, pebbles, pods from trees, dupattas, scarves, baskets, tents and other open-ended play materials. There is no specific goal that the child must achieve by playing with these toys. The focus is on an *Eat-Play-Sleep-Repeat* pattern with no emphasis on formal learning. The learning through such a technique can be immense.

Impact of play at various ages

To put things in perspective, let us see how play progresses from 2- 6 years. Children all over the world play similarly, irrespective of their culture and language. They speak in the common language of play.

Two- to three-year-olds: parallel play and imagination

Between two and three years of age, a child is interested in basic actions such as climbing, jumping and other such movements which help with balance and spatial orientation (also known as *vestibular sense*). These movements are exciting for children and they love to clamber over common objects such as furniture and windows, as they are curious and want to explore their world.

Three-year-olds typically engage in parallel play, which means they play on their own but like to imitate by playing with the same objects as their peers around them. They do not naturally socialise and play together, but just begin to interact with other children at this age. This may lead to small fights which will need to be sorted out by adults.

A three-year-old slips into imaginary play quickly and creates real-life scenarios based on observations from the surrounding environment or the stories that he or she hears. We have seen how children in



Playing with tree pods

the kindergarten like to wrap a dupatta around them to play the role of a mother/grandmother and cook with pretend kitchen utensils. Similarly, children love to play the role of a favourite character in a story they have heard, for example, wearing a cape and carrying a basket of food, similar to the story from *Red Riding Hood*. This kind of play shows that the images from stories or real life are internalised by them and expressed through the medium of play.

Four-year-olds: pretend play and manifestation of ideas

At four years of age, a child likes to observe other children and begins to socialise. Children enjoy playing together in groups, which allows them to both make a cohesive decision or engage in dissent. We can see the beginning of role play and pretend play. Children now also begin to develop the language to express their thoughts and ideas; they also exchange vocabulary and develop complex language. Pretend play enables a child to manifest something he has seen and experienced.

In our kindergarten, we played a game called *Let's Pretend*. A wooden log acted as a prompt to spark the children's imagination. They used wooden logs as musical instruments, imagining them to be drums, *tabla*, even a harmonium. One child held in hand a wooden rattle for a mic to mimic a performance on stage. What cannot be expressed through words can be conveyed through play.

Five-year-olds: role-play and consensual decision-making

Five-year-olds are more assertive in planning the games they want to play and choosing whom they want to play with. They are keen to make friends and may already be part of peer groups. Children take on various roles within the group: they could be leaders or followers. Some may choose to broker peace, while others may have conflicting opinions. The group will come together to develop imaginative scripts and engage in role-play. This is called dramatic play or socio-dramatic play, which is advanced and constantly adapts and shifts in keeping with the interests and ideas of children. This facilitates skills like joining a group, sharing and taking turns, role-playing and exploring different relationships (parent/child, brother/sister, doctor/patient) and negotiating with each other about what to do next.

Six-year-olds at the threshold of change and growth

At six, children are ready to take on the challenges

of grade school. Their play typically takes on a more practical and project-oriented theme. It is important for six-year-old children to finish this developmental stage while still in kindergarten, even though they may seem ready to take on the world. At this age, children may express at home that they are 'bored' at school during playtime. Many parents will assume that this means that kindergarten is no longer meeting their needs or that they need to enrol their child in more structured extracurricular activities to challenge and stimulate them. This, however, can end up hindering the child's ability to finish this developmental stage by 'busing' her and pushing her to the next stage before she is truly ready. A child at this stage is facing new inner abilities that she is not quite sure how to master. At this age, it also helps to give children more practical work, like sweeping, gardening, simple sewing, folding laundry, cooking, washing and dusting both in kindergarten and at home. This allows them to work through this time of uncertainty and enter play again and work with a new vision.

Can play help children who transition from a conventional school?

Aarush joined our kindergarten at five years, after spending a year or more at a very popular preschool. Initially, he found it very difficult to play with unstructured materials and took a long time to adjust to the Waldorf philosophy. He would constantly look to the teacher for guidance and instruction to play or to do some activity and would not take any initiative on his own. Aarush would return home and complain that school was boring. At five years, as outlined earlier, a child usually blossoms into a happy and confident youngster, who can initiate play with pre-planned ideas. However, this child was not there yet as his transition was much slower. With some effort, we were able to turn things around by the end of the academic year.

For a young child, transitions can be particularly different as conventional education sticks to a rigid and strait-jacketed curriculum that leaves little or no time for play. Play is often restricted to a short duration of time and is structured and defined by the teacher. It is often considered the opposite of work, but in reality, play can be seen as the main opportunity for children to take risks without fear of failure.ⁱⁱⁱ This opportunity is not provided in a mainstream classroom, where flights of creativity and mistakes made are not appreciated and the child is reprimanded and punished.

In summary

In my experience of working with children, families and teachers in various institutions that follow the Waldorf framework, I have observed one overwhelming similarity: *creative play is a central activity in the lives of healthy young children*. It helps children weave together all the elements of life as they experience it. It allows them to digest life and make it their own. It is an outlet for the fullness of their creativity and it is an absolutely critical part of their childhood. With creative play, children blossom and flourish; without it, they struggle to learn and develop holistically.

If there is one piece of advice I would offer parents and early childhood educators regarding play and early academics, it would be to relax and stop hurrying their children. Children have such deep reserves

for growth and learning that with careful nurturing and holistic support most will succeed wonderfully. This is a hard message to convey, especially in India, with parents pushing their children to achieve results before they are ready for it and use technology at a very early stage, when it is more important for the child to *experience* and *understand* rather than be pushed into rote learning.

An important quality of being human is that it takes quite a long time for children to grow up and develop all the capacities that are a part of human nature. Compared to the young of other mammals, a human child takes much longer to mature. Our children deserve the right to grow and progress in a slow and sustained manner. This can only be achieved by allowing children the time to play and experience the world at their own pace.

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*

Endnotes

- i Crisis in the Kindergarten - Why Children Need to Play in School by Edward Miller and Joan Almon
- ii <https://www.sunbridge.edu/about/waldorf-education/>
- iii https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/53567_ch_10.pdf



Divya B A is an early childhood educator specialising in the Waldorf technique of education. She is the founder of *My Little Bookshop*, an online store for curated Indian storybooks, open-ended toys, traditional crafts for children and more. Divya, who worked in various Waldorf environments as a teacher, mentor, parent coach, went on to establish the *Tulasi Waldorf Kindergarten* in 2018, where she emphasises bringing local festivals, food and language into the children's day-to-day experiences as suggested by Steiner. During the pandemic, she has also designed a programme for parents called *Slow Down Mama*, in which she guides parents in following Waldorf principles at home. She may be contacted at divya.ba02@gmail.com