

CLASSROOM HINTS

Overcoming Roadblocks to Playing With Children

BY BETH MARSHALL

Joining in children's play as a successful play partner is an important way for adults to support and encourage young children's learning. For many adults, however, playing with children is not an easy or comfortable role. In this article we will look at some common "road-



blocks" that can hinder adults from participating meaningfully in children's play and some ideas for overcoming such blocks.

Roadblock: Concerns About Time

Some teachers worry about what to do if they are needed in other parts of the classroom: "How could I tie my time up with one group when I need to be available if something else arises?" Here are some ideas for addressing time concerns:

- As you get involved in playing, consider explaining to the children that you might have to leave if other children need some help. This warning will help ease the situation if you do have to leave. Or, in the middle of the play, you can just tell children something like this: "I need to go help Amani, but I'll check back with you when I'm done."
- Be sure to refer to other children for help when appropriate. "Christa, I think Shelby was using that glue yesterday. You could ask her how she got it to work." When used consistently, this strategy increases children's independence, freeing you to spend more time in the "play partner" role and less time assisting children.
- If the children are engaging in pretend play, be sure to take a supporting role (not a central character) so the play can easily continue if you do have to excuse yourself.

- Rely on your teaching partner. If there is an interruption, is it something he or she can attend to? It is important to discuss this strategy with your partner and come to some agreement ahead of time. Many established teams get to the point where they just have to establish eye contact with each other to know who is going to move and who is going to stay!
- When you are a partner in play with children, don't forget to listen to what is happening in the rest of the room and to regularly scan the space to monitor what else is going on.



Roadblock: Concerns About Others Seeing You Play

You may really want to be more engaged with children, but one thought is holding you back: "What if parents or other visitors think I'm 'just playing'? How will they know that the children are really learning?" The following ideas will help you highlight the valuable learning taking place during play.

- Engaging parents in identifying this learning will help them recognize and value it as it happens in their homes. Try hanging a poster of all the key developmental indicators (KDIs)

in your classroom and posting lists of the specific curriculum content areas in particular classroom spaces. For example, post **Language, Literacy, and Communication** KDIs in the book area and **Mathematics, Science and Technology**, and **Creative Arts** KDIs in the block area.

- On a parent board, post photos of children involved in play. Include a caption (or anecdote) briefly describing the play and then list the KDIs (or COR Advantage items) demonstrated in the photo. Or, you can make the display interactive. Post the photos and captions (anecdotes) in one column, and list the KDIs in another. Add the heading “Find the Learning,” and ask the parents to identify which KDIs match each photo.

- In your parent newsletter, include a regular section titled something like “Learning at Home.” Each month, focus on a different curriculum content category, and invite parents to submit situations, quotes, or stories about their child that illustrate these KDIs.

Roadblock: “It’s just not for me!”

Some adults just don’t see play as the “adult” thing to do. This kind of concern may be expressed in various ways: “Play is supposed to belong to the children, and I’m afraid I’ll interrupt it and spoil their creativity.” “I’m just not comfortable playing with children — I wouldn’t know what to do.”

Strategies for Participating in Children’s Play

Look for natural play openings. Generally, it is more natural and less disruptive to join children during exploratory play, pretend play, or games, rather than during constructive play (making or building things).

Join children’s play on the child’s level. This may mean squatting, kneeling, sitting, and occasionally even lying on the floor. This way, children are not “looking up” to you, and you are not “looking down” on children.

Play in parallel with children. This strategy can be effective during exploratory play, as the adult plays near the child, using the same materials in the same or a similar manner.

Play as a partner with children. This works well with children involved in pretend play or games, with adults functioning as equals and followers.

Refer one player to another. This enables children to recognize each other’s strengths, regard each other as valuable resources, use their abilities for the benefit of others, and play cooperatively.

Suggest new ideas within ongoing play situations. Adults may also wish to challenge young children’s thinking and reasoning to expand the breadth of their play and, consequently, their understanding. When offering new ideas, remember to offer suggestions within the play theme, to address the “role person” rather than the child, and to respect the children’s reaction to your idea.

Source: *The HighScope Preschool Curriculum*, pp. 289–292.

This final roadblock, although large, is surmountable! Before looking at specific strategies, it may be important for you to **reexamine the principles of active learning**. Remember, **adult support** is one of the five ingredients (the others are **materials, manipulation, time, and language from the children**) and is therefore an essential piece. To explore why adult support is so crucial, try the following:

- Remember to use the strategy of “following the children’s lead.” Give yourself permission to start playing, primarily by imitating the child’s actions. If you are conscious of letting the child retain control of the play, you don’t have to worry about taking it over or interrupting her creativity or the flow of her play.
- If you don’t know where to start or what to do, start by observing the children. Sit down on the floor with them. How do they use the materials? Try using the materials yourself in the same way.
- Even though it might be uncomfortable, try to rediscover your own playfulness, on your own time. When no one is looking, jump in a water puddle! Take 15 minutes to fill a sink with sudsy water and treat yourself to some adult water play. Remember, this may feel very uncomfortable, just as doing anything out of the ordinary feels different. After you’ve “played,” consider what you did in terms of the KDIs.

...

These strategies can help you see how joining children in their kind of play enriches their time and increases their learning, thus making it worth the extra effort on your part. Try using these ideas the next time a roadblock to joining children’s play pops up in your classroom.



HighScope Teachers Talk About the Importance of Play

Editor's Note: Three current or former HighScope Demonstration Preschool teachers — Christine Snyder, Molly Jourden, and Shannon Lockhart — speak from experience about why play is important to children's development.



The Value of "Just Playing"

BY MOLLY JOURDEN, HIGHSCOPE
DEMONSTRATION
PRESCHOOL TEACHER

Early in my teaching career, I worked in a state funded preschool program designed to narrow the educational skill-level gap for at-risk children. When some of the elementary teachers found out that the preschool classrooms would be using a play-based curriculum (the HighScope Curriculum) they expressed concern and pushed for the preschool to use a more academic model. These teachers believed that the children would not possess the school readiness skills needed to successfully enter school the following year and that the year the children would spend “just playing” would give the children an unrealistic view of what school entailed. However, I trusted that my center and I had chosen the most developmentally appropriate approach to preschool by using HighScope. While some of the elementary teachers never fully understood the benefits of a play-based active learning approach, I was able to see the positive effect it had on my children. When I visited the elementary classrooms, I could see the children I formerly had in preschool quickly adjusting to the new routine, working collaboratively with classmates, understanding the directions given by the teacher, reading and writing about topics of interest, and solving mathematical problems. The kindergarten teachers were pleasantly surprised at the many skills the new kindergartners were coming in with and how those skills provided a foundation for the children to have a successful school year.

...

[Click here for entire newsletter](#)

Encouraging Trust in Play at Home

BY CHRISTINE SNYDER, HIGHSCOPE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SPECIALIST AND DEMONSTRATION PRESCHOOL TEACHER



As adults, it can be easy to take for granted the skills we already have and use every day. We often forget the long processes we went through to develop the skills to be able to read our e-mail, count out money, or write down a grocery list. Obtaining skills such as reading occurs in gradual stages over time and does so most successfully

in playful ways. We see this, for example, in understanding the simple ways children start to read through symbol recognition, by discussing what is happening in pictures, and by engaging in many enjoyable reading experiences with trusted adults. At home, children will enjoy trips to the library, reading before bed, identifying familiar letters or symbols on a drive through town, or helping find items at the grocery store by looking at pictures, symbols, and letters. If we as teachers can support families by offering examples of playful opportunities to support learning at home, parents and other family members will trust in how children learn through play as well.

• • •



Key Cognitive Skills Develop During Play

BY SHANNON LOCKHART, HIGHSCOPE SENIOR EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALIST

When young children are actively engaged in play, they are learning key cognitive skills that are part of

what is called executive function. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, executive function “refers to a group of skills that helps us to focus on multiple streams of information at the same time, monitor errors, make decisions in light of available information, revise plans as necessary, and resist the urge to let frustration lead to hasty actions” (2011). There are three dimensions that scientists have focused on when

defining executive function – working memory (ability to hold and manipulate information in limited time periods); inhibitory control (ability to filter out impulses and distractions and to regulate emotions); and cognitive or mental flexibility (ability to change plans on the spot). These dimensions are exemplified in the example of the princess play in the designated feature article of this issue of Extensions.

In this elaborate pretend-play scenario involving princesses and dragons, children are using all three executive function dimensions as they engage in cooperative play. There is much creativity and knowledge about princesses and dragons being shared as each child (and the adult) takes on a role. As the roles of the princess play are carried out, each child has to hold in mind each person’s role, and what these players are doing, along with their own role (an example of working memory).

As the pretend play continues, each child needs to stay within the play theme instead of acting out of character — and, at the same time, agree to each person’s changing ideas (an example of inhibitory control). In many cooperative role plays, children step in and out of character to give instructions — an example of the beginning of private speech, which is crucial to children’s inhibitory control. Private speech is happening when children talk to themselves about what they are going to do and how they are going to do it. Engaging in make-believe play is one of the most powerful ways in which children develop private speech because children use self-talk to make characters come alive through their own voices and through interaction with other children’s characters. This type of self-regulating language has been shown in many studies to be predictive of executive function (Spiegel, 2008).

As the scenario changes with one of the children’s ideas, she continuously changes her character — from a princess, to a dragon, to a fire-breathing dragon, to a pet (an example of mental flexibility). All of these dimensions are critical to children’s development of executive function, which allows them to be productive adults later in life.

References

- Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University (2011). Building the brain’s “air traffic control” system: How early experiences shape the development of executive function (Working Paper No. 11). Retrieved from <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>
- Spiegel, A. (February 22, 2008). National Public Radio. Old-fashioned play builds serious skills. Retrieved February 22, 2008, from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=19212514>