

Play is our Work



Watching young children being fully immersed in self-directed play is a precious gift for adults. Play is the work of the young child. It is of vital importance and has a health-giving quality. What does the young child need in order to enter freely into child-initiated and child-directed play? What is the role of the adult?

Children need, foremost of all, time and space to play away from the watchful eye of parents or teachers. They will direct their play themselves, exploring, seeking hiding places, collecting treasures and thus immersing themselves into their own world. The young child observes people, objects and occurrences in the surroundings. With its innate faculty to imitate play is initiated and carried out based on these observations. Play is a form of wrestling with the material world, exploring its properties and learning through experience about the effects one's own action can have.



The role of the adult in this process is to provide appropriate time and space in which this play can unfold in an undisturbed manner. Open-ended play materials like pieces of furniture, pillows, sheets and blankets for indoor play as well as natural materials from the outdoors are essential. In an imaginative approach to these materials the young child transforms them with ease and great flexibility as play unfolds and changes.

The child's play can be guided by the adult in different ways. As the child follows the impulses from within its being, the parent can follow the child's lead by understanding what the child is interested in. This will allow the adult to inventively intuit what and how play materials should be offered for free use. It is also important for the parent to practice not to intervene in the children's play

unless there is a risk or danger for the children. By being actively engaged in domestic or artistic tasks right next to the playing child, adults become role models for devotion and skill in their work. And finally, adults need to learn to trust that the children will take in the nourishing and supportive quality of the environment created by caring adults and will transform these in a meaningful way through their own will activity.



It is truly remarkable to see how the child's soul and spirit are active in free play. The element of thought has not yet been absorbed. And it is a kind of play which comes into being without any notion of use or practicality; it is the kind of play in which the child only follows what comes from within. ... The way the child lives into play originates in the freedom of the child's soul, but only seemingly so. For when one observes more exactly, one will see how children incorporate everything they experience in the world they live in. ... When one has sharpened one's powers of observation in this respect, one will no longer look upon play of this kind as something interesting, something which just happens in a certain phase of the child's life. One will put play in perspective and view its character in the context of a total biography. (Rudolf Steiner, GA 335)



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