

Creative play for your child

Creative healthy play is being challenged due to the increasing number of electronic games, DVDs and commercialized toys available for children. **Janni Nichol** offers suggestions for creating age appropriate quality play environments using objects from around the home.

Maria Montessori, in her book *The Absorbent Mind*, said "...the things the child sees are not just remembered, they form part of his soul..." and this is what free, creative, child-initiated play can accomplish for the child. They re-enact what they see, hear, experience in their surroundings, and come to their own understanding of these experiences.

Today there is an increasing bombardment from screen technology, and the media pressurises us to buy 'educational' toys, games and equipment to keep the children amused, educated and busy. These are all totally unnecessary in fact because what children need are strong inner resources which strengthen emotional and mental well-being, and this strengthening comes from providing a sensorial environment which is enabling rather than over stimulating, giving space and time for the child to just 'be'.

Toys should be made from natural materials which appeal to the senses if possible, such as wood, cloth, and items collected from nature. Slices of different sized logs which children can help saw and sand make great blocks for open-ended play. A circular slice off a log can be a plate, a wheel, a piece of toast, and leaves room for imaginative use. Large pieces of cloth (old sheets) can be used to drape over tables and chairs to make houses, boats or castles to play in. A home corner can be easily created with simple soft dolls (for boys and girls), a low table and small chair, and wooden plates, knives, forks and spoons, either child sized or adult – safe but 'real'.

Children's play differs according to their ages. It is enough to play simple

'peekaboo' games with the baby, sing nursery rhymes or provide a basket filled with interesting household objects (natural not plastic, e.g. egg cup, teaspoon, nail brush, small ball, square silk scarf, tea strainer, wooden spoon etc) for them to explore in their own time without your input.

When they become toddlers, let them explore the environment by helping you around the house e.g. filling and emptying the washing machine. As children grow and become more conscious of themselves as individuals, they want interaction with others, playing with or, in the case of children under three years, usually 'alongside' others. It is now that they begin to ask you to play with them, usually imitating what they have seen and heard. It is only after 3 that they need the social interaction with other children to take their play further, and begin to explore socially, using verbal and physical skills to communicate, initiate and take their play on.

Between 4 and 5 their play takes on a different dimension, and becomes creative, imaginative and representative. They imitate what they see around them, making it their own. Providing a workbench, real tools and an observant parent to show them proper handling, is now a useful addition to the play. Baskets of wool, crayons, scissors and paper, and stones, conkers, blocks, sticks, branches, feathers, pine cones, puppets, large pieces of material and most important, space and time – both indoors and out – is important for this age. At around 6 children come with an idea – 'I want to play knights, and need to make a sword' and they need the materials to do so. They direct and organise the play and need little input from the adults, other than freedom, time and space.

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We need to trust the child, and also to be aware that as the child is an imitative being; whatever we do, the way we act, speak and behave, should be worthy of imitation. Getting dressed, or helping friends or siblings do up zips, buttons or shoes in real life situations is more beneficial than practicing on so called 'educational' toys which have no real relevance to life itself. Cutting food with real knives or sewing with sharp needles are skills well learned.

What is the most important is to enjoy their childhood with your child. It is over so quickly we need to make the most of it, by giving them time to explore life - its joys and sorrows, its struggles and successes, supported in self discovery and in preparation for the adventures of a creative and joyful life ahead. ■

Janni Nicol is the author of *Creative Play for your Baby* and *Creative Play for your Toddler* (Together with Christopher Clouder. Gaia, Octopus publishing Group) which includes the Steiner Waldorf approach and simple toy projects for Birth to 5 years old. Also *Bringing the Steiner Waldorf Approach to your Early Years Practice*, Routledge.

Open ended toys can be collected from nature, or ordered from **MYRIAD natural toys and crafts** www.myriadonline.co.uk

Editor's Note

Visit www.truceteachers.org to download a free guide to *Infant & Toddler Play, Toys and Media*. These recommendations will give you a general idea of how to support your child's development through play including suggestions for types of toys which support healthy play.

PHOTO: KINDLING, JOURNAL FOR STEINER EARLY CHILDHOOD

