

## **EQ over IQ: How play-based learning can lead to more successful kids**

**Kate Hammer — Education Reporter**

**From Tuesday's Globe and Mail**

**Published Monday, Jun. 13, 2011 11:04PM EDT**

**Last updated Tuesday, Jun. 14, 2011 9:27AM EDT**



Millie Bolton wrinkled her nose and crossed her arms when her friends brought *Where's Waldo* back to the carpet. It was free-choice time in her kindergarten classroom in Thornhill, Ont., and her classmates had passed over her favourite book, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*, for what was in her estimation a silly choice.

As the children hunted for the man in the striped shirt, 5-year-old Millie bristled. She contemplated a tantrum, let out a sigh, and then brushed her pigtails out of her face and found Waldo.

Researchers would describe Millie's control over her emotions as self-regulation, and predict bright things for her future. Self-regulation is a hot topic in education, something that's hard to quantify but it can be better than even IQ at predicting academic success. It's also a side effect of play-based learning, the centrepiece of new full-day kindergarten programs in Ontario and British Columbia.

The appeal for many families is practical; the full-day model provides affordable and convenient childcare.

But beyond childcare are volumes of research that have brought play back into the classroom. They suggest that through these full-day programs Canada is building a generation of self-motivated learners who will be more successful, healthier and happier than any before them.

"There is a long history of understanding that children learn through play, but one of the things that has tended to happen, it comes particularly from the United States ... is this push to do things sooner, harder, to shove academics down to younger and younger children," said Marilyn Chapman, an early learning expert at the University of British Columbia and lead writer of B.C.'s new kindergarten program.

The reason the American approach doesn't work? If children are pushed to read, for example, they might learn at an earlier age but research suggests they're also more likely to become disinterested in reading by the age of eight.

"At the end of the day they don't like reading and writing and then they don't want to do it unless they're forced to; what's the point?" asked Prof. Chapman.

In reversing the pendulum back toward play, Canada is following top-performing countries such as Finland, where children don't begin formal lessons in literacy and numeracy until the age of 7.

Experts believe play is important because it teaches kids that different people have different sets of knowledge – toys can be hidden from one person, while another knows where they are. That involves understanding someone else’s point of view, or as it’s known among educators “theory of mind.” It also teaches that asking politely for a toy someone else is using is more effective than yanking it away, a form of self-regulation.

Research has shown self-regulation “is far more important than IQ in not just what kind of grades a kid gets, but how often the kid goes to class, how much time the kid spends on homework, how vulnerable the kids is to things like risky sexual behaviour, or aggression, or taking drugs, and even things as simple as how much time they spend watching TV or playing video games,” Stuart Shanker, a child development expert at York University, told a conference held by People for Education last fall.

Longitudinal studies that have followed children from the 1960s into their adulthoods are producing convincing evidence that this stuff matters.

About 40 years ago, researchers at Stanford University developed a way of testing aspects of self-regulation through something called the Marshmallow Test. A group of 4-year-olds were left alone in a room with a marshmallow, and instructed that if they managed not to eat the fluffy treat they’d be given a second one at the end of their wait. About 30 per cent of the kids were able to resist 15 or more minutes of temptation, and held out for a second marshmallow. The researchers followed up with the children as teenagers and adults, and found that those who were able to control their impulses were better adjusted as high school students, scored hundreds of points higher on their SATs, were less likely to be overweight or have drug problems.

The results marked the beginning of a shift in thinking in education, the end of the IQ test’s reign as the dictator of academic destiny and the rise of EQ, or emotional intelligence. Boiled down, self-regulation’s role in a child’s education helps explain why even the brightest students struggle – when they don’t listen in class or forget to do their homework.