

All Work and No Play...

"Play is the highest form of research."
– Albert Einstein



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DURING THE FIRST five years of a child's life, they learn more than at any other time in their life. That's why it's so important to 'get it right' in the early years.

So, 'Where do we begin?' I hear you ask. 'All they do is play!' I hear you say. Well actually, you are correct, and that is exactly how it should be. Play is how young children explore and learn about the world around them. It is through play that children engage in problem solving, test out ideas, ask questions and build new understanding.

Remember the days when you were trying to figure out how to build a den using only a bed sheet? Or cast your mind back to the time you needed to invite all of your teddies to a party but didn't have enough plates for your guests? For children, no doubt, these felt like very serious matters, and indeed they were, but unknowingly, they were also filled with many learning opportunities, rich in math and literacy.

In fact, play is recognized as so important to children's well-being and development that it is set down in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). You won't be surprised to learn then that play is also a fundamental commitment within the English Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum.

Play-based learning, then, should be recognized as a positive approach to teaching and learning, particularly in the Early Years. Therefore, teachers and parents need to facilitate appropriate learning experiences and guide children towards activities that will support them in growing into confident learners.

As many parents and teachers would agree, attempting to sit a five-year-old at a desk for hours at a time just isn't going to work! The key, therefore, to capturing a young child's interest and participation in learning is, indeed, through play.

Finding the balance between adult direction and child initiation is key. Play without adults can be rich and purposeful, however, after a period of time it can begin to lack purpose or become a repetitive activity which



is 'hands-on, brains-off.' At the other end of the scale, too much tightly-directed activity deprives children of the opportunity to engage actively with their learning.

As an example, Early Years Teachers at Saigon Star are encouraged to develop Role Play Areas that will encourage pupils to engage with learning experiences linked to their current interests and learning needs. Last term, for example, a cinema area (complete with popcorn stand) was built to promote opportunities for the children to practice their communication, language and literacy skills. Just imagine all the magical moments that were showcased: re-telling stories that we had learnt, using puppets that we had made, deciding on 'prices' and calculating entry 'fees' to see the shows. The children were even able to script their own films and explore using ICT by filming them on an iPad.

This kind of learning creates core memories which excite and enthuse children into wanting to explore more. It also allows adults to delicately balance the see-saw of finding the 'right moment'

to join in, to ask questions and to model new ideas.

While we were all experts at playing once upon a time. Here are a few tips to help you get involved next time a five-year-old hands you a toy train and invites you to join in.

- Be enthusiastic. If you're not having fun, you're out of the game. You'll also be modeling confidence and conviction of an idea.

- Comment on what is happening. Like a narrator, try to describe what the child is doing. For example, "I can see your train is on the track." This will also give your child the opportunity to either confirm or correct your statement. You will most likely be told very quickly what you should be doing next! Modeling good speaking and listening skills can take place here.

- Let your imagination go wild. Don't be afraid to pretend. Any object can be anything in play. Take that cardboard box and make it an airplane. Creativity is born through this kind of 'out of the box' thinking. ■