

Role Play for Children, the benefits to society

Submitted by: Aspen PR

Tuesday, 12 May 2009

The Benefits of Role-Play in a Modern Society

Babies and children learn the vast majority of what they know from watching adults and those people around them. Most children have an identifiable primary carer –the person to whom the child is most strongly attached, and who they watch and learn from at an amazing rate. The more closely attached a child is to a person, the more easily they will learn from him/her. Young children spend a lot of time at home whilst the primary carer is engaged in everyday activities such as shopping, cleaning, laundry, DIY, cooking etc. Children will learn from watching these activities being done, but they will learn so much more, and so much quicker if they are able to get involved as well.

However, this is not always possible (too dangerous) or practical (time/mess considerations). It is therefore important to help children understand adult behaviour and activities in a safe, age-appropriate way and role-play is one of the most powerful ways of achieving this. Role-play toys provide a wonderful opportunity for children to model their carer's behaviour with props that are appropriate for children (safe, smaller, lighter, and sometimes with exaggerated or simplified features) of various ages and abilities.

There is a place for all types of toys, but in contrast to highly prescriptive products (those with rules or instructions), toys that act as props for a child's own game help develop creativity and imagination. Toys that encourage role-play also develop communication and social skills if playing with friends or siblings. Children have to follow rules a lot so, when possible, it is wonderful for them to be able to create their own play. Even more benefit is gained if children are playing together or with an adult. Parents can learn a great deal about their child by getting down to their level and allowing their child to dictate the game.

It seems that parenting has become a real minefield. The more we understand, the more pressure there is to 'do the right thing' for your children. Food and health is an area of particular stress for parents today. The well-documented rise in child-hood obesity has been linked to a number of factors including sedentary lifestyles and fast food. On the other hand, anorexia is also a growing problem and seems to be affecting children at younger and younger ages. It is a minefield for parents trying to help their children grow into healthy teenagers and adults.

Children will copy their carer's approach to cooking. Role-play with toy food, play kitchens and utensils will facilitate discussion about food and increase children's understanding of the importance of a balanced diet. Even very young children can pretend to cut with play knives and prepare pieces of play food. By doing this they can explore their food and develop a healthy, balanced attitude towards nutrition.

The same is true of most adult activities. Children's development is driven by the fact that young children always want to seem more grown up than they are. By enabling them to feel grown up by modelling everyday adult behaviours (cleaning, laundry, shopping, DIY, looking after the children etc) parents are validating their children and bonding with them. Role-play toys that encourage these activities are

incredibly valuable and should not be overlooked in favour of the latest high-tech toys. Many of the life skills that children need to develop in order to live successfully as an independent adult are not taught at school so as well as bonding with their children, increasing imagination and communication skills, parents who facilitate role play are helping them to learn skills that will benefit them in later life.

Five Top Tips to encourage positive Role-Play

1. Make it relevant to an activity that you're doing or have done recently.
2. Help your child if he/she is stuck for ideas at the start but then stand back and let them direct the play. Be willing to take directions about the role-play without trying to change them or suggest your own ideas.
3. Be enthusiastic about your child's ideas and praise them for their imagination.
4. Ask open-ended questions to encourage the progression of play - (e.g. 'what shall we do with this baking tray?' rather than 'shall I put the baking tray in the oven?').
5. Be creative with equipment - a saucepan doesn't have to only be used as a saucepan, it can be a helmet or a drum or anything else that a child wants it to be.

All items featured in this piece, plus many more suitable for role-play, are available at www.whywoodworks.co.uk.

About the Author

Dr. Amanda Gummer PhD, BA (Hons), PCHE

Amanda's work in the field of childhood development and family dynamics began while studying for her PhD. She volunteered as a childcare worker in a women's refuge where she raised the standard of facilities for children and enhanced their educational opportunities by introducing a non-threatening home-school programme for those children unable to attend schools locally.

With her work as Project Manager for Family Friends, a London-based charity that helps vulnerable parents, she successfully carried out and implemented a strategic review of the organisation whilst expanding the services that the organisation provides to families within the community.

Amanda was an associate lecturer in Child Development with the Open University until the end of 2006. She contributed to the Conservative Party's Childhood Enquiry (2008), is currently an advisory member of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Scientific Research in Learning and Education and an active member of both the National Toy Council and is the Play Research network, presenting a paper at the 2008 ITRA World Congress.

Amanda lives in Hertfordshire with her two daughters.

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