

The Wonderful Virtues of Free Play

By Jo-An Vargo

Educators in primary education are very familiar with the work of David Elkind, Ph.D. He is the author of several highly regarded books such as *The Hurried Child*, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*, and *The Power of Play*. Dr. Elkind is currently professor emeritus of child development at Tufts University. His work over the years built upon the theories of Jean Piaget, and has important relevance to the childhood experiences of today. As families leave for summer vacation, I'd like to quote some of Dr. Elkind's wisdom. I hope the reading gives each of us a moment to reflect upon the importance of unscheduled time for unstructured play in our children's lives. I strongly advise you to create days/times in your child's summer schedule where the television, video games, Wii, and the computer are off limits.

“Child play is very different from adult play. For young children in particular, play is a fundamental mode of learning... When children play games of their own invention, or even traditional games like hide and seek, they often make up their own rules as to who is to be “it” and what the limits of the game are. In this way children learn what Piaget called “mutual respect.”

Clearly, play serves a very different function for children than it does for adults. For children, it is the best way to learn about self and the world through self-created experiences. That is one reason child-initiated play is so important and why it should not be replaced either by adult-organized sports or by academic activities disguised as games. When we appreciate the important role play serves in a child's learning about self and world, we give children the time and opportunity to engage in the surest way for them to fully realize all of their intellectual, emotional, and social potential.”

So create time for opportunities to climb trees, build structures from branches/twigs/leaves, be inventive with cardboard boxes, make mud pies or sandcastle cities, and go on a nature hike and take a sketchbook to collect memories of the wonderful insects, plants, and rocks you find.