

■ TEACHERS DON'T PLAY! CHILDREN'S VIEWS OF PLAY AT SCHOOL

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What do children say happens at school? As part of a larger project, we asked children who were just about to start school, and who had just started school, what happened at school. Of the 50 children we asked, most said that school was for work, but they thought there might be some time for play. The distinction between play and work was mentioned often. Generally, children indicated that they played outside at break times, and did work during the rest of the day.



Do you play at school?

The children at school said that they played after recess; only after lunch; or sometimes at lunch. Greg was clear about the 'rules' of play:

Interviewer: Do you play at school?

Greg: Sometimes at lunch.

Interviewer: In the classroom?

Greg: No ... yeah... we do but you are not allowed to shout and you are not allowed to touch and not allowed to fight...

The children who were about to start school also distinguished between work and play, with the expectation that play followed work:

Interviewer: What happens at school?

Brad: You've got to do art work and after you do art work you get to play outside.

Interviewer: What else do you think you will do at big school?

Bill: Playing games.

Even when play was considered a possibility within the classroom, it was evident that some of the activities planned by teachers were not considered play by the children involved.

Gary: Paintings are boring

Interviewer: Gary, do you like painting?

Gary: No, because Miss Ball tells us what to paint.

Interviewer: So, is that work or play?

Gary: Work. Because it's boring ... I would like there to be no teacher. Because it's fun and you get to draw whatever you like ... I like being outside and then we don't have to do what the teacher tells us to do.



Do teachers play?

None of the children said that the teachers played. The following comment suggested the opposite:

- Interviewer:* Who do you play with at school?
- Fred:* Everyone. And you need to be fair and share
- Interviewer:* Does the teacher help you play?
- Fred, Jack, Jim:* No!!!!
- Fred:* She goes and eats her lunch
- Interviewer:* What does the teacher help you do?
- Fred:* She helps us do work.

Playing with friends

The children indicated that one of the best things about school was the chance to play with friends. Often the combination of best things was playing with friends outside. In Bianca's case, food was also important:

- Interviewer:* Do you play at school?
- Bianca:* Sometimes you do and sometimes you do school work.
- Interviewer:* What is the best thing about school?
- Bianca:* Playing and having lunch.

There was a clear message that friends were vital to play in schools.

- Interviewer:* What are the best things about school?
- Connor:* Playing with my friends.
- Interviewer:* Are there some kids who don't have friends?
- Connor:* Yes.
- Interviewer:* What happens to them?
- Heidi:* They get really sad.
- Interviewer:* Do you help them?
- Heidi:* Yes. You can't leave anyone alone with no friends.
- Connor:* We play with them. We be their friends and play with them.

These comments are similar to those described by Blatchford (1994, p. 26) as he cites the work of Goodnow and Burns (1985): "To be at school—specially on the playground—surrounded by peers but without friends is awful ... Life brightens considerably when a friend appears." Starting school can be an anxious time for some children. Having a friend to play with helps make the transition much more comfortable and positive.



Big kids and playgrounds

School playgrounds can be large, noisy, bustling places. For children who are just starting school, big kids can be fun to be with, or scary. Sometimes children spoke of the fun they had playing with big kids; other times the anxiety produced by big kids was emphasised.

Hannah: I like playing with big kids. My brother—when I first started school I played with my brother here and Nathalie. He is in Year 5 and I played with him too.

Interviewer: Do you like being in the playground with the big kids?

Greta: No. I like it when the classes are not there and it's just the Kindy kids and you get to do what you want to do and there's no big kids bossing you around.

Gary: The time the big kids get in trouble is mostly line-up. You don't feel real happy that they get into trouble but sometimes they are mean to you.

The big kids and the playground are issues raised by children about to start school. Brett's comments reflect some anxiety about this aspect of starting school:

Interviewer: What do you think will happen at big school?

Brett: A boy might push me over on the cement.

Interviewer: Is that what happens at school?

Brett: When you are at school they might push you over because you are little and they hurt you. And you get bad sores.... And stitches ...

One of the other issues about playgrounds is often that there is very little to do—often there is limited play equipment, or restrictions on what equipment may be used by different groups and when and where it can be used.

Liam: [School] has a bigger playground. You could do more stuff on it, my brother goes [to school] and it has a huge playground.

Gay: [My school] doesn't have a playground ... it has grass.

Removal from play as punishment

Several of the children discussed the removal of play time as a punishment. Such a punishment was regarded as dire, as play time was generally replaced with having to sit outside the principal's office, or on seats outside. Andy's comment was typical of the comments:

Andy: Sometimes kids get into trouble...If it's before play time then she [teacher] won't let you play outside because you've been naughty.

Differences between preschool and school

Children in both school and preschool settings indicated that these settings were quite different, in terms of play and play opportunities:

Mark: I think preschool is more fun [than school], cause I can play.

Shane: [School] it's like preschool but you can't make noise. You can't play all day, but we did in preschool.



Children's perspectives: An overview

When these young children described play at school, their focus was on playing with friends, generally outside the confines of the classroom. Play was regarded as a time to be with friends and to make friends. There was an expectation that all children would have friends and that friendships were accomplished and maintained through play. In addition, several of them spoke with caution about older children and the illicit nature of their play, emphasising the ideas that older children get into trouble and can cause harm. The preschool children expected to play at school, but also expected to do work and homework. They commented on the playground—its size, noise level and number of children and the equipment in it, suggesting a level of concern about these elements.

Issues and implications

There are several possible reasons for why we should be concerned with what children think about play at school. Firstly, if we value play as a means of children learning about the world and the people and places within it, it makes sense to see play as having a valued and valuable place within a school curriculum. Clearly, it is the view of these young children that this is not the case. Other research suggests that teachers also tend to regard school as a place for learning, rather than play, and that many teachers regard work and play as incompatible, much as the children themselves have reported. (Dockett, 2001; Dockett & Meckley, 2002).

Secondly, it is of concern that children regarded teachers as non-players and that children do not see teachers as having any role in play. Adult roles can be a major factor in promoting play, maintaining play and helping develop complexity. Adults can also have a major part in assisting children who do not play, do not appear to have friends, or who are excluded from play. If teachers distance themselves from play, they are unlikely to realise what it is that children are playing and why it is important to them, or if some children are excluded from play for various reasons.

Thirdly, if we regard play as a disposition that is learned from being around others who demonstrate that disposition, we need teachers who can be regarded as playful to demonstrate the importance and value of play. This doesn't mean that teachers should control or direct play; rather it suggests that teachers who show that it is all right to play encourage children to play. In broader sense, it is also possible that teachers and children who engage in play use similar skills in problem-solving and creative tasks.

Most of all, children's play matters. It is important to the players and deals with issues, areas, themes and roles they regard as interesting and worthy of attention. It gives children opportunities to explore, challenge, investigate, connect and have fun. It provides adults with many insights to the world of children. If we are to take children seriously, we need to reflect upon what is important to them and the provisions we make, and the encouragement we give, for them to play.

