

Play Makes You Smarter!

by Sherry Cleary

There's a much-used phrase we use when we discuss children: "Play is the work of the young child." Nothing is closer to the truth. Play and work are synonymous for young children. From birth, children work every waking moment discovering how their world works. If one watches, really watches, a small baby, their industrious nature is apparent. A baby focuses on things in his sight and studies them. Watch his eyes - they move ever so slightly, taking in every angle and shape of the object. Sometimes we even see a child's brow furrow, indicating the level of intensity he's using to learn about the subject. As children grow from infants to toddlers to preschoolers, they work every minute developing skills in math, science and literacy. They also learn about relationships and the way the world works through the same play/work.

When children play with blocks, they use and develop muscles that later help them write. They learn about numbers, counting and basic mathematical concepts such as bigger than, longer than, half as big, twice as big. As children build block buildings, they make scientific discoveries about weight, balance, gravity and cause and effect. Children who make signs for their block buildings or who use props with words on them to enhance their block buildings are getting ready to read. Children who play with blocks with their friends learn how to cooperate, negotiate, plan and organize.

The phenomenon of learning through play doesn't stop with blocks. Every time a child engages in play, learning takes place. At the Children's Museum, understanding how children learn is what guides the design of the exhibits. Museum staff know that when children are engaged in joyous, meaningful play they learn in the most efficient way. They internalize critical skills at Museum activities and develop their language, imagination, fine muscles, large muscles, mathematical and scientific reasoning and social skills. In fact, the exhibit philosophy of the expanded Children's Museum - Play with Real Stuff - is a perfect tribute to the work of the young child.

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