

Building the Foundation for Learning

Deanna Macioce, MS, OTR/L

It seems as everywhere we turn there is discussion about our education system. From standardized testing to the Common Core, there is so much focus on scoring and benchmarks that as parents, therapists, and even teachers we sometimes feel that our children are not really learning. And this is true for all children, not just those with a diagnosis. We tend to put so many demands and stressors on our children about learning from an adult perspective at such an early age, that we are, in fact, at times hurting their overall development. Based on Piaget's Cognitive Theory, a child's brain learns and thinks differently than an adult's brain.

From an occupational therapy perspective, a child's 'work' is play. Therefore, when a child's brain and body are developing, the biggest impact comes in the form of play. Allowing children the opportunity to learn through the manipulation of objects and toys, using creativity and imagination, and performing self-initiated problem solving, sets the foundation for ongoing learning. However, we are found to judge our early education centers and

preschools on their overall "curriculum", often faulting the extra time given for self or explorative play. We, as a society, want to see activities and lessons focusing on the learning of academic skills, such as colors, letter, and numbers. With the advances of technology, we are often "wowed" by the environments that perform learning activities with iPads, computers and smartboards. While these are all important and beneficial, they should not be seen as the foundation to learning. Children who are given the opportunity to develop the proper cognitive foundation, will easily pick up the technology, and will not "fall behind" as we often hear.

In addition, from the sensorimotor standpoint, children need to move. Movement plays a key role in strengthening the vestibular and proprioception systems, while also developing bilateral coordination, core stability, and balance. And believe it or not, these are needed for a child to be a successful student. Children are expected to sit and attend for long periods of time always being in the upright position. And those who lack core stability, find it hard to maintain this position, and are found to be the fidgeting, slouching child.

Therefore, children need the to opportunity to play and learn through movement. Unlike adult brains, they cannot sit for the three-hour lecture class, and take in information that comes only in the form of listening and writing. When we allow their brains to develop early on in the proper developmental environment, we will be able to build strong critical thinkers and learners. That means that lessening their recess and physical education time is not beneficial to the educational curriculum.

So, our job as parents, teachers, and therapists, is to work hard to find that balance. Give our children the time to move and play, while reaching all those educational benchmarks. As a therapist working on handwriting, move away from the tabletop and find other creative ways to achieve the same goals.

Parents, instead of always using electronics as a form of down time, especially when children come home from school, encourage them to participate in 20-30 minutes of play or outside exploration before even asking them to focus on their homework. Do not over-schedule children with organized sports and extra-curricular activities. And teachers, find ways for children to learn new concepts using their bodies,

manipulatives, and allow children movement breaks, not just those on an IEP. This takes extra effort on all parties, but if the team works together we will be setting our children up for success.