

PLAY!

Have you ever asked a child what they are doing and they responded: "Just playing." Well, I'm here to tell you that there is no such thing as "just" playing. Playing is incredibly significant at every age, especially in the successful development of a child.

"In play, a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play, it is as though he were a head taller than himself."

- Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934)

Vygotsky, a Russian educator and psychologist, set out early to solve the educational problems of his time. His Cultural-Historical Theory deemed that child development was clearly a result of the interactions between children and their social environment. Whether a child is interacting with his or her parents, siblings, teachers, or playmates, significant development is occurring. In addition to people, children form relationships with objects such as books, toys, sand, dirt, leaves, insects, and the like. Children use their interactions with people and objects to construct knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

This summer take advantage of outside play time with your children. Give your child the opportunity to create an imaginary situation by offering nonstructured props and modeling how to use them. For example, take the old bed sheets outside and assist in hanging them around low tree limbs or outside furniture to create a child's camp site. Be a catalyst for your child in play. Give them ideas, and then take their lead. Engage with them, but don't take over their make-believe situation. Vygotsky and others suggest that fostering make-believe play with preschoolers could provide the same support that formal instruction offers for older students.

The other evening we joined some friends at GB's Restaurant uptown. There was still plenty of light in the sky at 6:30 and our friend's son, (Peter, age 2 1/2), wanted out of his chair. He pleaded with us to go for a walk outside to "build." We knew there were no legos, no sand, and no playground. We were unsure of what he wanted exactly. Behind this restaurant is a large parking area with lots of gray rocks. He sat down quickly and comfortably, peered up at me, and frankly asked, "Beverly, you want to build buildings with me too?" Here we were sitting in a parking lot, where we, the adults, only saw it as rocks. Here he was in a vast land of "building" rocks basking in the joy of creating! Allowing ourselves to see through their eyes will help us help them gain developmentally. Children will naturally go to great lengths to understand their world, working in concert with the interactions of parents, teachers, and objects.

As Vygotsky said, "A child's greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become his or her basic level of real action."