

A World Without Play

by Dr. Ernie Dettore, Jr.

It is the year 2025. A group is embarking on an excursion with all of the makings of an archaeological dig. They enter guardedly but with determination through a sealed passageway to rediscover a long-abandoned practice involving engagement with artifacts only found now in history books or paintings. What this handful of adventurous children and adults are entering is the lost world of play. The artifacts of which I speak are blocks, sand and dress-up clothes. Tunneling to this place took years - through layers of mounting education standards, prescribed curricula, increased emphasis on direct instruction, inappropriate assessment in the name of accountability and the misguided requirements for children in math and literacy. Long since have words like self-expression, problem solving and creativity been removed from the list of children's skills to be nurtured. Discovering the time to even dig into this lost world was even harder to find. Children's schedules were so tightly packed with lessons, organized competitive sports, planned play groups and time spent in front of television and technology screens that play, in its purest and simplest forms, was all but forgotten.

While this may pose a rather bleak view of the future for young children and play, James L. Hymes Jr., child development specialist and author, reminds us that, "Play builds the kind of free-and-easy, try-it-out, do-it-yourself character that our future needs. We must become more self conscious and more explicit in our praise and reinforcement as children use unstructured play materials: "That's good. You use your own ideas ...That's good. You did it your way ... That's good. You thought it all out yourself."

Play develops curiosity, invention, persistence, problem solving, creativity and aestheticism in children. With this lively, unpressured and naturalistic approach to learning, children will continue to experience:

- individual and unique perspectives developed through play
- simple pleasures that play brings
- opportunities to practice new skills and functions
- advantages to act on objects and experience events
- the ability to transform reality into symbolic representations of the world
- consolidation of previous learning
- occasions to build the imagination
- alternatives to violence and despair

In 1964, Paul McCartney wrote a song for Peter and Gordon called World Without Love. One line of the song goes "I don't care what they say, I won't stay in a world without love." Can you imagine a world without play for our children? I can't.

Dr. Ernie Dettore, Jr., has 30 years of experience in the field of early childhood care and education, is a State Trainer for childcare center- and home-based providers and has served on the Museum's Education Advisory Board for over 10 years.