

# The Role of Play at School and Home: A Foundation for Lifelong Learning – Teleclass Re-Cap

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This week, we held a highly informative (and fun!) teleclass on the role and importance of play, generously sponsored by [Explore + Discover](#) and expertly facilitated by early childhood educators, Renee Bock and Jacqueline Marks. Renee and Jacqueline helped participants to deepen their understanding of play, its relationship to development, learning, and how to recognize and foster play experiences with your child.

In case you missed it, you can listen to the recorded teleclass [HERE](#).

Renee and Jacqueline covered such issues and questions as defining play, the relationship between development and play, how infants, toddlers and preschoolers play, materials to encourage play at home, how to have meaningful play dates, and how play sets the foundation for future learning.

In the following piece, Renee discusses how important play is for our children and their well-being:

## ***A Place for Play Every Day***

Many of our most potent childhood memories revolve around play – exploring with friends on the beach, building with blocks, organizing a train set, talking to favorite stuffed animals. What makes these memories so sweet? Why do we hold on to them throughout our lives?

Play is a powerful transformative force for young children – for all children. It not only raises their self-awareness and confidence, it can encourage exploration and foster creativity.



Photo courtesy of Jennifer Lee

I vividly recall, as a new student in early childhood education, writing a paper that featured close observations of my son at play. At the time, Raffi was four years old and a die-hard *Thomas the Tank Engine* fan. I watched as he carefully considered track placement, manipulated structures, and mostly spoke aloud to the trains. He took on their voices, warned them of impending doom, and gave them directions of what to do next – all independently and with a strong inner vision which I found really fascinating in a four-year-old child.

By watching closely as each of my three sons and many of my students exhibited similar play behaviors working alone or with friends, I came to understand the complexity of play and the layers of learning that coalesce when we give

children the space to develop their play. I've defined play as having four main components and hope that by sharing these with other parents and teachers we will make conscious decisions to protect play and safeguard evolving childhood memories.

**Independent Choices** – Children must have the opportunity to self-select their experiences because the deepest learning occurs when we enjoy what we do. From birth and beyond children must have the chance to elect activities that interest them. Depending on the child's age and individual personality, the choices will vary; there's no one correct way to play. At nine months, it might involve crawling to a fascinating toy. At 16 months, it could include mixing of sand and water. When a child is four, it might feature dressing up like dragon and working with friends to storm the castle.

Adults can and should try to lead children to new and potentially interesting experiences, and some children require more encouragement to take risks and break out of narrow patterns of play behavior, but all children must spend time engaged in those activities that attract them during the day even as we ask them to stretch their areas of interest.

**Attractive Materials** – At home and at school, children need to have a variety of materials to explore and play with. What is attractive to one child may not be attractive to another. A cardboard box, a hunk of clay, Legos, a doll, a tea set – you know your own child and will make the best guess at what will interest him or her. As children get older, they will often let you know their passions and preferences. Children don't need a lot of materials; they need the right ones that invite repeated open ended pleasure and learning.

**Unlimited Time** – Play is able to develop deeply when we provide children with open ended time. In our hectic world this is not always easy. Just as we schedule soccer or music lessons, we need to plan for open ended play. Often a child who is painting, building, or even working in a dress up area will announce, "I'm done!" when they decide they're finished.

If we shift or rush children from activity to activity, they won't have the chance to develop attention and devotion to task – two skills that are necessary for all future academic learning. These skills can be learned organically if we give children the time for self-selected play.

**Social Skills** – Children are the most powerful teachers of children and many of life's lessons are learned through play. As children get older, they become more aware of other children, interested in what they want and do, and can respond in action and words. By three and four they cooperate and collaborate. They can share materials, exchange ideas using words, compromise, listen and respond, lead and follow. Social flexibility, the ability to step into someone else's shoes and engage in a shared pretend agenda, is in many ways the crowning achievement of early childhood.

It is also crucial for you to play every day with your child. When you participate, let your child lead and do what they say. If they want you to be the baby, be the baby. If you are a king, act like a king. They need you to model the kind of collaborative work they will do with friends and ultimately at school and at work as adults. They depend on you to maintain emotional equilibrium even when they lose theirs. The child needs to hear your sophisticated vocabulary and to try out new ideas in a safe place. Let them try things and fail and be there to support their experimentation.

Play can happen anywhere if we make space for it in our lives. Indoors and outdoors, in the stroller, the classroom, on the front porch, in the bathtub, or at the sink – play is a ribbon that runs through our days with children. Play is so memorable because we discover ourselves in the process – our words, ideas, and our endless capacity for creativity. When we embrace a child's play, we validate their spirit and celebrate an emerging sense of self. By playing with our kids we get to know them better, and this intimacy is, after all, what parenting is all about.

\* \* \* \* \*

***Renee and Jacqueline want to also share with you some additional resources on PLAY:***

**Organizations that advocate for play**

[Alliance for Childhood](#)

[Center for Childhood Creativity](#)

[Children and Nature Network](#)

### Other resources on the internet

A wonderful blog on play in early childhood, and particularly the subject of managing play dates is [Janet Lansbury's Elevating Childcare](#) – and check out her new book, *Elevating Childcare*.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children provides excellent resources on the value of play, including

Rivkin, Mary and Schein, Debra. *The Great Outdoors: Advocating for Natural Spaces for Young Children* (NAEYC).

*Play in the Early Childhood Years*, in *Young Children*, NAEYC, May 2014.

In particular, check out the [article on the TIMPANI toy study](#) which presents information on the best educational toys and you can also see.

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*Renee Bock and Jacqueline Marks are dedicated early childhood educators with over ten years of experience in the field and they are passionate advocates of play for young children. Together, they are working to open [Explore+Discover](#), a social learning center in Manhattan that aims to set the standard for infant and toddler care and education. Renee holds a Master's in Early Childhood Education from Bank Street College in New York and an MA in American History from New York University. Jacqueline holds an MS from Bank Street College in Early Childhood General and Special Education and a BA in Art History from Columbia University.*

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