

Emotional Development Through Play

Valentina Trivedi

The older we grow, the more we 'do' and the less we 'play.' While work is glorified and put on a pedestal, play is believed to be too trivial, too childish, too silly, unimportant and discardable. Children are routinely told to 'stop playing' and finish their homework, their meal, or whatever it is that the adults around want them to do at that time. And yet a person no less than Albert Einstein said, 'Play is the highest form of research. All creativity stems from pure play.'

Ample research has proved beyond doubt that unstructured playtime in early childhood is vital for the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical well-being and development of children. Play is a natural tool for them to develop self-esteem, resilience, empathy, social skills and problem-solving skills, among others, as they learn to cooperate, overcome challenges, and negotiate with others. In short, play builds skills that are the foundation for an emotionally stable, empathetic, self-confident adult and we owe it to our children to ensure they do not miss out on it. Our responsibility to devote time to play at school becomes even greater if we accept the fact that it may not be a part of the child's home life for a variety of reasons.

Why isn't there more time devoted to play in a child's daily schedule? In my experience of holding 'play-shops' with teachers, I find that the biggest obstacle is the fact that teachers themselves have forgotten how to play. Parents and educators are so serious about 'teaching' that they forget that a healthy dose of play is vital for children to learn. And play here does not refer to outdoor sports, which are important for a whole set of different reasons.

Playtime around stories

No matter what his/her qualification, every teacher *must* be a reader of stories, and be as comfortable engaging with stories as speaking in his/her first language. The reason stories have ceased to be a tool to facilitate learning (different from teaching) is that adults feel engaging with stories is childish and something one must grow out of.

The benefits of engaging with stories at any age are manifold and would require a separate article; suffice it is to say that it is criminal to relegate it to a place of short-term entertainment. Beyond reading and telling stories, here are a few more ways in which teachers can engage children in playing with and creating stories because creation, no matter at what scale, provides a slice of fulfilment to our fantastic human mind while being a celebration of our spirit. It makes us pause, observe, wonder, play, believe, empathise, emote and share.

Take turns to build

One child begins a story and then all children, by turns, keep adding to it, building upon what has been said by the previous child. Depending on the number of children, you could start with one round and move to two rounds for the next story. Each child adds only one sentence. This is a very simple creative exercise in which children can experience building something together as each child builds on what has been said earlier and not in isolation of his/her own thoughts and ideas. At times, it also encourages a child to say as much as he/she wants to in one grammatically correct sentence.

Pick and choose

Make three lists: characters (elephant, queen, mouse etc.), setting (jungle, river, city, school, mountain etc.) and objects (magic wand, a cup which speaks in a human language, a watch which allows you to travel in time, a cloak which makes you invisible, etc.). Each child has to choose one thing from each of the three lists and create a story. As a second part, you can pair up the children and ask them to create a new story with three or four of the six things on their combined lists. This is an activity that allows children to expand their imagination which is directly linked to improving problem-solving skills.

Points of view

Tell a story with multiple characters (some of the Panchtantra stories work very well in this activity). After the story, divide the children into groups asking each group to come up with the story from

the point of view of a particular character. This technique nudges children to see things not just as black and white but to try and understand the motivations of characters who act in ways that are not considered acceptable. It opens young minds to the idea of accepting points of view other than their own.

What if?

This involves juggling characters and settings in creating alternate scenes of known stories. What if the kind person had a change of heart, the mouse got magical superpowers, the monkey could read people's thoughts, the king actually wanted to become a singer, or the crow wanted to walk instead of fly? The possibilities are endless and can spur young minds to take wing and work at coming up with alternate solutions, endings and ways of being.

Introducing a modern object/place/person

This is a variation of the previous. So, the horse has a cellphone, the thief has a scooter, the postman meets Shahrukh Khan, the boy owns a playground, the elephant has a microwave oven, etc. Again, there are endless possibilities. When children create or co-create stories, I always point out to them that they have created something brand new - which did not exist in the world till then!

These are just a few ways of playing with stories. Once you start, you will be surprised at how more ideas of doing this keep appearing like stars in the evening sky.

What else can it be?

You will need a collection of objects of varied shapes and sizes. Hold up one object at a time and ask children to first say what it is. Everybody will give the same and obvious answer. Now tickle their creativity and ask them what else it can be. Give them some time and pauses, as their creative juices start to flow. Sometimes, when they run out of answers, you may need to help them open the parachutes of their minds further by asking questions like, 'What can it be to an ant?' 'What can it be to a giant?' You can start with things such as a bowl, a coaster, a spoon, a bottle etc, and then move on to the more irregularly shaped objects.

This is a simple exercise that encourages children to look beyond the obvious, in a playful way. The implications are far-reaching. From opening their minds to possibilities beyond the obvious about objects to doing the same about people. They learn

to not judge people by how they may appear but keep their minds open to the possibilities within a person. It broadens their outlook and gives them a holistic worldview. Playing this game is a good reminder for teachers too to keep their minds open to the immense possibilities within each child.

Magic in the mundane

This is truly a magical way of being, which has the power of playfully transforming every ordinary thing in our surroundings. Anthropomorphism, which comes naturally to a child, is, simply put, the attribution of human characteristics, emotions, and behaviours to animals or other non-human things (including objects, plants, and supernatural beings). Children take to it like a duck to water and teachers are surprised to experience this new way of looking at things.

Apart from all the earlier mentioned benefits of play, this kind of playful thinking helps build a foundation for two vital attributes: empathy and connectedness, which go a long way in moulding happy, compassionate mindsets.

One of the easiest ways to get started is to bring an object to class - it could be a pebble, a flower, a leaf, a ball, a cup, a spoon, a key or a comb. Pass it around or in an online class just show it to the children. Now ask the children to think of where it is usually found or kept and list each of the following:

1. What must it be seeing?
2. What must it be hearing?
3. How do you think it feels?

It is important that the questions are asked one at a time so that the children focus on creating one list at a time. Also, they should write only single words; not sentences and paragraphs because this is not a language or writing exercise but one of flexing their creative muscles. This playful exercise can be an ongoing one with a new object each time.

4. The next step would be to try and imagine a dialogue between two objects. This can even continue in two-minute capsules: What did the piece of chalk say to the table? What did the teacup say to the spoon? What did your school bag say to the chair?

Playtime: Things to remember

Play, instead of being teaching focused, is learning focused. It invites grown-ups to drop their roles and connect with the children before them as well as with the child within

them. The benefits of play are not accrued by children alone. In giving adults the opportunity to engage with children and see the world from their perspective, play is a priceless stress-relieving, anti-depressant, anti-ageing potion. Erik H. Erikson said, 'The playing adult steps sideward into another reality; the playing child advances forward to new stages of mastery.'

These simple tried and tested playtime activities developed experientially, can be used in a classroom, at home, during a journey, in a doctor's waiting room or just about anywhere. They give children a chance to think independently, come up with original ideas, create, co-create and express themselves; in the process giving them a chance to hone the 4Cs of Critical thinking, Communication, Collaboration and Creation in an enjoyable way. Simple tools to facilitate learning, these require no additional expense on equipment and can be enjoyed by a person of any age. All that is needed is a small slice of time and a commitment to make it work.

A few basic points for teachers and parents to remember while indulging in play:

1. Remove and lock up your 'teacher' hat and don the 'playmate' hat instead. Remember this is pure playtime, untainted by 'teach' time.
2. Put away your personal mantle of age, qualification, likes, dislikes, strengths, weaknesses, and other responsibilities. When I interact with children, I am completely in the moment, listening and responding. I put away my cellphone and never let it disturb the sanctity of playtime. It brings rich rewards of joyful creative experiences.
3. You will get a glimpse into how children view their world, how they approach situations etc. Resist the temptation of being judgemental. You are not there to judge the merits or demerits of a response while playing a game. Remember,

for the duration of play, there is no teacher. You are all playmates. Children may say they did not know, they will hide, lie, pretend and all this is acceptable because the stakes are low – these are only imagined situations. By offering a space to them to express themselves freely, you are providing them with a healthy learning environment.

During one such game a child was asked, 'What would you do if you accidentally tore your best party frock?' She promptly replied, 'I would blame my sister.' In such a scenario, resist the impulse to give a sermon on the value of truth. I promise you that your accepting an answer like this will not encourage the child to become a liar. It will just build a bond of trust between the child and you.

4. Do not carry personal responses from the games to use as arguments when you wear your teaching hat again. Think of it as a book – you open the book when you start playing and once playtime is over, you close it. Playtime is a sacred, magical bonding space. Of course, during the course of the day, some or the other child might pipe up with an idea for playtime, because their creativity has been stirred by the games and it continues to bubble. At such a time, you would have to resist the urge to say, 'stop daydreaming and pay attention,' and gently tell them to save it for the next round of play.

These are a few playful activities, deceptively simple in execution but remarkable in the learning they bring about. Once begun, they offer endless possibilities as there is no knowing what amazing thoughts and ideas the children can come up with. Let us acknowledge the fact that play is not a luxury but an absolute necessity and a vital pillar of skill-based learning. A child's world should not be restricted to the home and the classroom but should also include a vibrant world of make-believe and we must constantly strive to enrich this inner world.



Valentina Trivedi is a writer, performer and educator. She is the first alumna to be a member of the Board of Governors of The Doon School, Dehradun. Her creative work encompasses various mediums: performing, writing scripts, directing short films, editing, translating, adapting and telling stories, most recently on her numerous podcasts. Passionate about children and learning, she specialises in approaching the learning process from a child's perspective and has been invited to numerous educational forums to share her views. As a *Dastango*, singing is a unique aspect of her performances. She has worked in both, formal and informal sectors, proactively initiating and encouraging community endeavours. She can be reached at storyweaverval@gmail.com