

From Play to Practice

Connecting
Teachers' Play to
Children's Learning

Marcia L. Nell and
Walter F. Drew,
With Deborah E. Bush



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Together with his wife, Kitty, Walter founded the Institute for Self Active Education (www.isaeplay.org) in Boston. Since 1975 he has pioneered the development of reusable resource centers as innovative green partnerships with local business and industry. He engages teachers and parents in investigating play and developing play leadership skills through professional development workshops, play symposiums, and discovery retreats.

Walter believes that the ability to play and to remain playful promotes harmony and mental well-being at any age; therefore, it is a valuable resource for nurturing a healthier and more productive society. Walter and his wife have seven children and four grandchildren.



Deborah E. Bush is a professional writer and editor who has been on the board of the Institute for Self Active Education since 2004. She is an advocate for fostering self-active play, especially for children, who have so much to gain from it.

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Foreword

Why is this book so important today? Now and in times past, play has been often thought of as a frivolous activity, sometimes even referred to as irreligious and sinful. One of the pervasive themes throughout the history of play theories—and the discussion regarding the relationship between play and education—is the notion that the value of play in learning lessens as the child matures. We often forget that play is one of the most *natural* ways for human beings to learn. In our curricula, play gives way to “work” as the child advances in skills and conceptual ability. Adults are so intent on children learning specific information that intentional time for play and the creative and recreational benefits it provides are often lost. It is my observation that every individual at every stage of life learns from and is energized by play.

In each generation we seem to cover and then uncover, or rediscover, play. We have to relearn that play enables children, as well as adults, to learn and interact in positive ways. *Play is for keeps* and is central to human growth and development in all stages of the life process. Every few years, we play catch-up with new research findings and new modes of play. And, every few years, we hunger to simultaneously revisit and affirm the foundations that underpin play, a most natural part of human development.

This book takes us on a journey to uncover play once again. In it we are reminded of the importance of certain dimensions of play for children’s growth and development. It is becoming apparent to the general populace, not just to educators and child development specialists, that play—and the lack of it—have important implications for children’s growth and development. These implications include

- The elimination of recess and its relationship to increased obesity in children
- Dual language learners’ play experiences and the influence on language development
- Play stimulation for infants and its impact on brain development
- Didactic play and the loss of contact with nature through discovery and exploration
- The effects of computers and commercialism on the privatization of play

What is the unique (or new) message this book provides? The authors of this book subscribe to self-active (hands-on, open-ended) play as the natural learning process that provides the greatest meaning and the most learning for the individual, whether child or adult. The authors carefully examine the research and findings that support using play to foster learning and emotional development.

The authors' passion for helping us understand what self-active play is and their commitment to writing this book stem from their own successful practice and understanding about the *art* of play for children and adults. Through the anecdotal and photographic illustrations in this book, the self-active play model comes alive—you will see play uncovered anew for what it truly is, a positive transformational experience for all people.

This book reminds us that the process of self-active play is available for all of us to experience. Through it, we come to know the theory of play. We get in touch with the child inside us. We become better capable of analyzing and identifying the roadblocks to play that we might encounter in our own roles as teachers, directors, policy makers, or parents. And, if we adults *intentionally* experience this, how much richer might we make the learning environment for young children, and how much more engaging and meaningful might their learning be?

The authors draw on their highly successful experiences and the lessons they have learned through their collaborative participation in the Institute for Self Active Education (www.ISAEplay.org); NAEYC's Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum; various state and local AEYC Affiliates; and the Reusable Resources Association. During the last three years, the ISAE model was tested out at national and state NAEYC conferences, and has been adopted in 12 AEYC State Affiliates. At the time of this writing, the model is being considered by an additional eight State Affiliates. I am emphasizing this development since it is a successful model, and has effected change in the current research and practice in many states. It also is a model that can be easily replicated by teachers to engage students and parents; by administrators, trainers, and college instructors to facilitate the development of teachers; by AEYC Affiliates (local and state); and also by parents, child care providers, community enrichment organizations, and educational policy makers.

I have joyfully participated in self-active play workshops and know their value. It's a fun model to experience. It produces new insights for individuals, challenging views on the outcomes of play in relation to learning. It is a good method for reaching out to parents and decision makers, and it consistently and predictably provides positive results. Reading about and understanding it as outlined in this book is one thing, but actually doing it—engaging in the process, becoming immersed in play, and intentionally reflecting on your personal experience—will positively affect your role in children's education and your entire life's outlook.

May this book be an inspiration to play, and in the playing, to learn and become, so that children may grow naturally in meaningful knowledge and wisdom.

—Edgar Klugman, EdD
Professor Emeritus, Wheelock College
August 28, 2012

As the authors of this book explain, a self-active play workshop for adults begins with these instructions: “Don’t talk.” How can that be? Adults talk all the time. Teachers talk more than most other people. Many teachers think they’re teaching only when they’re talking (or that’s what their supervisors think, even if the teachers know better).

Most workshops and trainings for teachers begin with words, while everyone sits politely and listens. (Adults are good at sitting still.) They don’t begin with the physical stuff of the world. Young children aren’t good at sitting still, so we let them play with physical stuff until it’s time for lessons. Adults need practice in remembering what it’s like to be a learning child.

I’ve been to many of the authors’ workshops over the years, whenever I’ve had the chance. The workshops are adult play experiences that ask us to pay attention to the physical world. That’s where children’s learning begins—with exploration of their own bodies and what they can do, and of the stuff all around them: What’s this? What does it do? What can I do with it?

Cognitive theorist Jean Piaget identified three kinds of knowledge, acquired in this developmental sequence: physical, social, logical. Physical knowledge is acquired in interaction with one’s body, and with materials. Babies are highly motivated explorers of both: What can I do? What is this stuff? Adults have internalized most of this knowledge—until they encounter something new and unexpected, and are once again challenged to become explorers.

Social knowledge is what we learn from our human community—all the facts to be memorized, the rules that bind us together, the languages we speak. These things are learned by imitation and by rote. They’re learned from someone more knowledgeable—perhaps a teacher imparting what our society already knows. This learning is first invented and then passed on. The owners of social knowledge decide when to dole it out. They hold the power and test you to see if you’re following their rules.

If we’re learning a complicated task like teaching or technology, first memorizing it as social knowledge may be a useful shortcut. (New teachers sometimes say, “Just tell me how to do it. I haven’t got the time or energy to figure it out on my own, and I’m drowning.”) But that’s only a temporary solution. Eventually, problem solving will be required, and then we have to think. Logically.

Logical knowledge is constructed by the learner through thinking about experience. If you think about the way very young children acquire a language, they learn it first by imitation. But they get to mess about with it, and then they start inventing grammar, and it’s only at that point that they really start understanding the language and playing with it to see what it can do.

Physical knowledge, which is intuitive, and logical knowledge, which is reasoned, both give the individual much more power than social knowledge does to be competent, to do things, and to make decisions in the world. Physical and logical knowledge give power both to individuals and to groups who don’t necessarily have access to power otherwise. And they are both learned through play.

Mastery of play is the most important developmental task for young children. One reason is that they are ready for it—it’s the best thing they do—and the other reason is they’ll never have time enough to do it again, because somebody will catch them and start teaching them social knowledge and make them behave responsibly and help make the world work.

Play begins with stuff—things to get your hands on. As Hawkins states, “The teacher’s contribution to play always begins with the physical environment, with stage setting. Developmentally, physical knowledge comes first. Children need the physical stuff of the world, the *It* out there that the *I* and the *Thou* find mutually interesting” (2002, 52). An important part of an adult’s role in enabling play is providing the objects, materials, and props that children use in their play. “It’s up to adults to provide enough space, enough materials, and enough time, by arranging the environment so the play can happen” (Jones & Reynolds 2011, 21).

But, where does the stuff come from? All preschools have toys for children to play with, although some toys stimulate more imagination and experimentation than others do. Some preschools provide a generous supply of tools and materials to create with—paper and markers, clay and paint, water and buckets. Some preschools make a point of including items from nature—sand, rocks, seashells, pinecones—and even some of the creatures that live out there. Some make imaginative use of recycled materials from businesses and factories (there are lots of those in the workshops described in this book). It’s through playful exploration of “the hundred languages” in which experience can be represented that children and adults keep learning together (Edwards et al. 1998).

In contrast to familiar kinds of toys, many of the objects provided in self-active adult play workshops are surprising; they aren’t things we see every day. The workshops described in this book embody a growing movement to incorporate recycled materials into hands-on learning in science, mathematics, and the arts, as well as into learning through play at all ages. Play workshops grew out of concern for the environment (both natural and manufactured) as well as from the conviction that active learning is the most important kind.

As so well illustrated by Topal and Gandini (1999), recycled materials, such as those from manufacturing settings, can be “beautiful stuff.” Such items rarely appear in most people’s lives. And objects from nature may be familiar to botanists but not to the rest of us. I once added very large Ponderosa pinecones to the play materials at a national conference in southern California, and one of the participants asked to take them back with her to Boston. She’d never seen them before and wanted to introduce her children to them.

Adults are often play deprived. This book offers a challenge to *rediscover play* with stuff, and to build one’s understanding of children’s learning through reflection on one’s own play experience.

As I understand play, it’s always self-active. Writing our thoughts about *playing to get smart*, Renatta Cooper and I playfully invented these dictionary-style definitions to reflect the circumstances of early childhood education at the beginning of the twenty-first century:

playing (pla`ing), v.i. Choosing what to do, doing it, and enjoying it.

smart (smart), adj. Optimistic and creative in the face of the unknown. (Jones & Cooper 2006, viii)

It’s through play that young children get smart, and it’s through play that adults stay smart. To be a teacher, or a parent, it’s important to be “optimistic and creative in the face of the unknown,” because the outcomes of teaching and childrearing are never directly predictable. When we ask ourselves “If I do this, what will happen?,” we don’t know for sure what will happen.

Some play happens in the imagination, inside one's head. Some play happens in conversation—shared imagining. But play with *materials*—things in the physical world—grounds us, whether we are 3 or 43. It's "stuff" that provides the "It" that centers social relationships and the social construction of knowledge. Science educator David Hawkins explains, "You grow as a human being by the incorporation of conjoint information from the natural world *and* of things which only other human beings are able to provide for in your education" (2002, 54).

All the many languages that human beings use—all the arts, materials, mathematics, writing, and oral language—are explored and practiced and experimented with for mastery by children who have the chance to play. Then, they are used to build logical knowledge. Logical knowledge involves the relationships between things, and the testing of hypotheses: What will happen if I do this? Children, to grow up competent, need to acquire both physical and logical knowledge. Both of these are learned through play. They really aren't learned in any other way.

Play isn't just fun. It is skill acquisition—physical skills and thinking skills. When you're young, play is spontaneous. You get to play with this now, but if you want to be really skillful you'll keep on playing when you're grown up. Children, though so new in the world, know this. As adults, we may need to be reminded. Play workshops are wonderful reminders.

At these workshops, participants are asked to do and to reflect. Reflecting is a process of *representing* one's doing, saving it to go back to and think some more. We reflect by drawing and writing and singing and talking—and including others in our thinking in order to extract still further meaning. This book includes many examples of participants' reflections, in which the players tell us their experiences. They provoke us to contemplate our differences and *our likenesses*. My personal reflection on my very first experience with one of these play environments appears in Chapter 9. My, that was active play!

—Elizabeth Jones
Pacific Oaks College
August 25, 2012