Educational & Developmental Intervention Services (EDIS) Personnel Development

KIT

Keeping In Touch

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"Authentically Exploring Children's Play"

Resource Article

In the late 1990s marketing companies began making claims that teaching babies to read, talk, and understand geometric forms could be improved by watching specialized video content. Since then, those claims have widely been discredited. However, the question about television continues to come up. Given the predilection of television (TV) viewership, perhaps we should take a step back and consider how TV and, more recently, screen time have come to be such a common phenomenon in the lives of babes.

Wartella, Richert, and Robb (2010) examined this issue and published their findings in an article, 'Babies, Television and Videos: How did we get here?" The researchers reported that TV ownership in the United States in the 1950s grew rapidly from 7% in 1950 to 83% in 1957 (p. 117). A similar situation arose with the advent of video cassette recorders (VCR) in the 1980s and 1990s. By 1995, 90% of American households had a VCR (Winston, 1998). Some speculated that in the early days of TV it would serve as the "new hearth" for families, a sort of organizing activity around which the family would gather to watch and discuss programs. TV began to play a central role in American homes throughout the country. Unfortunately, studies from that era did not demonstrate increased interaction of family members. Rather, TV time simply resulted in more time spent together in a room looking at a TV. For a baby in these homes, the baby learns that we watch and focus on the TV set. In 1961, Schramm et al. found that 50% of toddlers aged 2.8 years were regular viewers.

The advent of Sesame Street, a program dedicated to content for young children, was perhaps one of the earliest products targeting developmental programing and proposing the idea that learning could happen through TV watching. Anderson and Levin (1976) studied the toddler viewership of Sesame Street and found that attention to the program was inconsistent and shifting from ages 24 months to 30 months but this was followed by a significant increase of attention to the TV at age 30 months. They noted that children under 30 months were more interested in interacting with their mothers and playing with toys.

Resource Article (continued)

The Kaiser Family Foundation (2006) found that on a typical day, children under the age of 3 years engage in only two activities more than they spend watching TV: 1) book sharing/reading with their parents; (2) listening to music. They also found almost half of all children 1 year or younger and approximately three quarters of 2 to 3 year old children watch TV daily.

So why are babies and toddlers watching so much TV? The "new hearth" (family members gathered together watching TV) has morphed into a constant state of the TV being on during waking hours (background noise) in many homes. Additionally, the number of TVs and screens in the American household has increased. Many toddlers now have TVs in their bedrooms and many adults have laptops and smartphones. Streaming companies with on demand baby and toddler videos also contribute to the excessive screen time for babies and toddlers. All of this media time has had some deleterious effects on learning. Studies have found that children growing up in heavy TV use homes are less likely to spend time reading (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006) and are less likely to be able to read (Vandewater et. al. , 2005).

Marketing efforts targeting babies have become almost universal with their attempts to "capitalize on parental anxieties about normal child development and a presumed deficit when it comes to teaching their children the skills they need to be ready for school" (Garrison & Christakis, 2005). Interestingly, many of these marketing campaigns suggest through thoughtful interaction with babies using their products, parents may see increases in cognition, language, phonics, etc. However, when these video materials were analyzed for interaction content, relatively little (about a third) was found. As a result of the increasing support against these and similar baby education marketing claims, "…the Federal Trade Commission required all baby videos to limit the educational claims present on their video boxes" (p. 121).

So what do parents think about screen time for their babies? Many different studies support the notion that parents continue to think that educational programming supports baby and toddler learning. Perhaps, parents feel that giving their child the gift of their own TV, when they were unable to have TV growing up, is giving that child a step up in the world. Perhaps they are taken in by the media claims. Or perhaps they are misunderstanding what works for slightly older children and generalizing that down onto their toddlers and babies. There are studies which have found that programs like Sesame Street positively influenced children living in low income homes. Children who watched Sesame Street at 2 and 3 years were found to have positive long-term cognitive effects, especially for boys (Anderson et al., 2001). It seems that viewing educational programs in the preschool years may have positive outcomes for later childhood. But, preschool age is not the same as baby and toddler age. And the American Academy of Pediatrics (2016) appears to understand this important difference as they recommend children over 2 be limited to only 1 hour of screen time per day, children 18 to 24 months be limited to no or only co-viewing, and 18 months and younger be limited to video-chatting.

With our increasing dependence on screen devices, including the old fashioned TV, perhaps we should consider how our interactions with media can affect our children. Perhaps we can also think about ways to enhance interactive viewing when the TV is on. This could be a great conversation to have with our families, when there are questions about the TV.

Wartella, E., Richert, R. B., & Robb, M. B. (2010). Babies, television and videos: How did we get here? Developmental Review, 30, 116-127. Accessed from http://cmhd.northwestern.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Wartella.Richert.Robb_.2010.pdf

What do the data say?

If play is so valuable, why is it occurring less, and what can we do to promote play?

There is no denying the value of play on children's development. In a research summary on play and learning Rachel White writes, "The drive to play is so intense that children will do so when they have no real toys, when parents do not actively encourage the behavior, and even in the middle of a war zone" (White, 2012, p. 5). This statement reminds us that play is a natural and integral part of children's lives. Play is fun and if it's not fun it is probably not play. Play is motivating, as it stems from children's interests, fosters their engagement, and builds their competence to master and gradually develop new and higher level abilities (Dunst et al., 2001). Shonkoff and Philips (2000) also highlight that play promotes brain development.

The value of play is quite profound. Through play children learn a myriad of skills, behaviors, and functional abilities both within and outside of various social contexts that will be foundational to their lifelong learning and later success in life. Play is also unique as it includes the complex integration of all domains of development. It is nearly impossible to play and not engage motor, cognitive, social, communication, and adaptive learning at least to some degree. In this sense play benefits the whole child.

Play and the benefits of play start early. For example, the early playful interactions infants share with their parents lay the foundation for the baby's later play with peers and others. Even conflicts that occur in play provide opportunities for children to learn how their interests and desires may differ from others, how their actions and reactions impact others, and eventually how to respond in appropriate and effective ways. Thus building their inter and intrapersonal confidence and competence. Early play with objects sets the stage for problem-solving and creativity (White, 2012). As children experiment with different toys and objects they are building higher level thinking that will be important for learning STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). During play children also experiment with and practice language. A study sited in White's research summary, found that children talked more, spoke in lengthier utterances and used more complex language when they were engaged in pretend play compared to participation in other activities (Fekonja, Umek, & Kranjc, 2005). In pretend play children practice daily living skills such as dressing, eating, grooming, etc. Play is physical too. Children move about in many different ways during play. They build endurance, muscle strength and coordination all while having fun. Children's play is enmeshed with millions of interrelated skills and abilities that develop and grow during early childhood.

Yet, in spite of the recognized value of play, the amount of time children spend playing is less. White quoted a study by Elkind (2008) indicating that children today play eight hours less each week compared to children twenty years ago. The increasing emphasis and pressure on children being 'academically ready' for kindergarten and school is overshadowing the value of play. This is creating a conceptual gap between learning and play. Yet, we know that play IS learning and pre-academic drilling is work and rarely fun for children or parents.

So what can be done? We can be play advocates. We can help families and caregivers promote children's playful interactions and play opportunities. We can reinforce that play does not mean sitting on the floor with the child and a fancy toy for X number of minutes a day. Play can happen throughout the day as part of what families do naturally. Diaper changing can be playful by playing peek-a-boo with the diaper (the clean one), singing a song, exchanging funny sounds, etc. We can remember and remind others that through play children learn lasting skills that will be essential for later life and work. We can help others decipher the learning that children gain through play. And we can emphasize the importance of fun in play. After all, if it's not fun it's not play.

White, R. E. (2012). The Power of Play: A Research Summary on Play and Learning. Minnesota Children's Museum Smart Play, St Paul, MN.

Consultation Corner

From February through July 2017 we are excited to have **Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak** as our Consultation Corner expert. During this series Kristie will address a variety of questions that will help us *Authentically Explore Children's Play.*

Learning is a complicated process, and a child's success is highly dependent upon a variety of factors, including environmental circumstances and individual differences. However, one key to successful learning is to create matched pairings between **what** we want a child to learn or experience and **how** we go about supporting and scaffolding learning opportunities.

When thinking about **what** we want a child to learn or experience, parents and caregivers can start with being clear about **what** they are teaching. At the same time, this means avoid talking broadly about desired outcomes and experiences. For example, instead of talking about teaching "*self-regulation*" as a broad set of skills, talk about teaching and supporting children's "conscious control of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors - the ability to stop, think, and then act" (McClelland & Tominey, 2015) by doing things such as getting, shifting, and keeping attention, considering alternatives, and making plans before taking action. Second, parents and other caregivers need to know **what** the trajectory of an outcome or experience looks like for a very young child, for an older, more experienced child, and even in neuro-atypical situations. For example, knowing that functional use of objects comes earlier in development than representational play with objects. Third, parents and other caregivers can strive to know for a child, **what** Vygotsky referred to, as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is the place where learning is challenging and exciting, but not so much as to interfere with the learning process. For example, if a child is learning to walk independently, we start by providing both of our hands to support, and then slowly removing the support when we have a sense the child is ready and able.

To successfully create these supported and scaffolded learning opportunities, parents and other caregivers can employ straightforward strategies for **how** to teach, such as following a child's lead and interests, providing timely, targeted, and specific feedback, and distinguishing between wants and needs.

In this newsletter, I share **how** to support a child's development and learning by distinguishing between *wants* and *needs*. Gaining clarity on wants versus needs not only ensures learning success, it helps strengthen a parent's or other caregiver's relationship with a child. And as many of us say, "relationships are the only active ingredient to supporting children's development and learning".

So, what's a want versus a need?

Let's start with *needs* - what are they anyway? Using something like Maslow's hierarchy, we can come to understand that all children *need* food, drink, and shelter. However, they also *need* safety, love, and affection. In essence, brain research has extended our thinking about needs and we now recognize that in order to grow and develop, children *need* our time, our attention, and our understanding. Further, children *need* consistency, for us to set boundaries, to recognize and reduce stressors, and for us to capitalize on their interests and strengths.

So what about wants?

For me, *wants* are much simpler. When I think about a "want", I think about an entitlement, excess, or even something like "icing on the cake".

Consultation Corner (continued)

But how do you tell the difference between a want and a need?

A primary way to tell the difference is to consider the age of the child. If a child is young, I'm going to argue their response is more about a *need* than a *want*. Young children *need* us to be the ones to set the boundaries, to clarify, to make things predictable, to reduce their stressors, and to be understanding. The burden really falls to the adult, even when we "want" a child to act differently. In other words, we may "want" a child to be more independent, more regulated, more logical; but because they're still young, they're still developing, and because they don't have conscious control over their thoughts, their feelings, and their actions, we *need* to provide for them.

A second way to distinguish between wants and needs is to consider whether or not we've taken the time to teach a child the difference. Again, we may think that the child "wants" our attention non-stop, "wants" to avoid doing what's required or necessary, or "wants" their way. But if we can dig a little deeper, and when we understand they are young, we can begin to understand it's not really their conscious control over saying, "I need something," versus "I want something." We can also aim to ensure sufficient models for how to get needs met in socially appropriate ways. Oftentimes children are imitating what they see. It's our job to help them understand the difference between a want and a need, and what they can do in response to their feelings.

In the end, when parents and other caregivers are clear about the outcomes and experiences they desire, and are able to scaffold and support children's development and learning by distinguishing between wants and needs, children experience success in learning.

BONUS! To learn more check out Kristie's podcast **"What Children Really Need"** available online at:

https://prekteachandplay.com/podcast20/

Included as a resource, in this podcast, are the following 6 guiding questions to determine if a child NEEDS something or 'just WANTS' something.

1. **How old is the child?** *Remember, it takes years for the brain to fully develop and for the child to have conscious control over their thoughts, feelings, and actions.*
2. **Have the stressors a child is exposed to been considered as mediating factors?** *Sometimes when we reduce or remove stressors, we see a difference in a child's thoughts, feelings, and actions*
3. **Where, in the peak, is the child when we think they "just want" attention , to avoid a task, or to get their way?** *If the child is already on the "red train", they are in fight flight, or freeze mode vs. making conscious choices.*
4. **Have alternatives, as to what the child "really" needs, been considered?** *For example, are they hungry, tired, or feeling lonely or confused?*
5. **Are sufficient models and learning opportunities being provided for the child to distinguish between wants and needs?** *It's important to intentionally model the difference between wants and needs and to provide the tools that allow the child to respond appropriately.*
6. **Have you considered your own triggers when it comes to determining if a child wants versus needs something?** *Sometimes when we're feeling frustrated, tired, or overwhelmed, we can react versus responding with compassion showing a readiness to problem-solve, and/or having the energy to scaffold and support the child through a difficult situation.*

Pretti-Frontczak, K.
https://prekteachandplay.com/podcast20/

On the WWW

The Illinois Early Learning Project has developed a set of Graphic Tip Sheets that provide easy to read visual illustrations of development enhancing activities.
For example:

- Healthy Children Eat Right
- Read with Your Toddler
- Tech Time for Infants and Toddlers
- Things to Do While You're Waiting
- Play With Your Toddler—Indoors

Also included are numerous written tip sheets, such as, Choosing Child Care for Infants & Toddlers, Play Right—Don't Bite!, Sharing Books with Your Baby, What Makes a Good Toy? And more. Many of these tip sheets are also translated in other languages, making them even more useful. Check out these tip sheet resources at:

http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tipsheets/index.htm

Continuing Education for KIT Readers

The Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) is offering a continuing education opportunity for KIT readers.

In line with the focus on *Authentically Exploring Children's Play,* readers are invited to receive continuing education contact hours for reading the monthly KIT publications (February through June 2017) and completing a multiple-choice exam about the content covered in these KITs.

KIT readers will receive the exam in July 2017. There is no need to register for the CEUs. Rather, if you are interested complete the exam online at www.edis.army.mil

Upon successful completion of the exam, you will receive a certificate of non-discipline specific continuing education contact hours.

KIT Newsletters are available online at **www.edis.army.mil**

Thank you for your continued interest in the KIT.