



Montessori Student, Age 10

MONTESSORI AND PLAY

Laura Flores Shaw, MS

KEY POINTS

- Though articles abound in the media extolling the virtues of play on children's cognitive development while demonizing work,¹ these articles rarely define play, and they only seem to define work as the didactic instruction found in conventional schools.
- Within the research literature, there is the overall construct of *playful learning*, which is broken down into *free play* and *guided play*.² The latter benefits children's learning while the former does not.⁶
- *Pretend play* does not foster creativity, better problem solving, and higher intelligence; nor does it foster better social and emotional competencies.⁶
- Dr. Maria Montessori initially thought children needed toys, but the children showed her otherwise, so she removed them from the environment.¹¹
- An examination of the broad *playful learning* construct and Montessori education found that the two have much in common: both have an overarching structure, free choice, peer interaction, materials specific to the developmental stage, a lack of extrinsic rewards, and just plain fun.¹⁴ These elements are also present during pretend play.⁶
- The dichotomy of play versus work is false, as it fails to consider how the two actually overlap.¹⁶

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Had...children chosen instead to play with toys, a very different educational system would have been developed.

Angeline Lillard, PhD
Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius

When I was the head of a Montessori school many years ago, a prospective parent who came to tour the school greeted me by saying, “I’m only here because my husband went to a Montessori school as a child, and he insisted I visit. But I don’t believe in ‘work’ for children. I believe in ‘play.’”

Needless to say the meeting did not go well.

Her assumption that work is bad while play is good for children kept her from seeing what was really happening in the classroom. But who can blame her? Articles abound in the media extolling the virtues of play on children’s cognitive development while demonizing work.¹ What no one seems to notice, however, is that these articles rarely define play, and they only seem to define work as the didactic instruction

found in conventional schools. But when we really examine the constructs of play and work, we see that there is far more to this picture than “play is good” and “work is bad” for young children – especially within a Montessori context. In fact, we find that the dichotomy of work and play as usually presented in the mainstream media by well-meaning child advocates is actually a false one.

WHAT IS PLAY?

Play is a construct that is likely to mean different things to different people. For parents, play may bring to mind children frolicking through fields, hanging from trees, playing in mud, and generally just doing whatever one wants. But for researchers who must actually define their constructs to clarify what they’re studying, play is more complex than that.

Within the research literature, there is the overall construct of *playful learning*, which is broken down into *free play* and *guided play*.² Free play involves pretending (which is discussed in detail later), playing with objects and/or peers, rough-and-tumble play with very little adult control, and no extrinsic rewards. Guided play, on the other hand, falls on a continuum and involves adult guidance that promotes academic knowledge through activities that feel like play rather than the I-want-to-poke-my-own-eyes-out-because-I-have-to-sit-still-and-listen-to-the-adult form of didactic instruction. This continuum is also

based on the amount of guidance a teacher provides. For instance, some teachers may only provide guidance via specific materials in the environment, while other teachers may provide materials and still lead all playful activities. But there is that wonderful middle ground, as Fisher, et al. (2011)² state:

Teachers play a unique role in guided play experiences. They can sensitively guide learning, creating flexible, interest-driven experiences that encourage children's autonomy/control over the process (p. 343).

Further support for this wonderful middle ground on the guided play continuum comes from two meta-analyses conducted in 2011 examining 164 studies of *discovery learning*. These analyses showed that *unassisted discovery*, as it occurs in free play (wherein the teacher provides no actual guidance in the learning process), doesn't benefit students. However, *guided discovery* involving more teacher scaffolding and feedback (which can come directly from the materials or other students and not the teacher) does benefit students.³

Overall, play is a broad construct, and what the research shows is that free play doesn't benefit children's learning. Does that mean children should not be allowed time for free play? No. But it does mean that developing a "curriculum"

around free play won't provide children with opportunities to practice purposeful sensorimotor skills that need to become automatic so that later deeper learning can occur.⁴ We can't just tell children, "Play until you're six, but then you need to get down to business" when we haven't provided opportunities for them to gain the sensorimotor skills necessary for literacy and numeracy. Instead, we need to provide those opportunities for learning in a way that feels playful.

Pretend Play

A common concern parents have with respect to Montessori is that the classrooms lack a dress-up corner where the children can engage in pretend play. Montessori children are also encouraged to use the materials as presented rather than pretending, for instance, that the [Red Rods](#) (which provide indirect preparation for mathematics and directly train visual discrimination of differences in length) are ski poles. Again, this concern is understandable due to the plethora of articles claiming that pretend play fosters creativity, better problem solving, and higher intelligence.⁵

However, careful analyses of 40 years worth of research on pretend play and its purported benefits shows that "the evidence that pretend play enhances creativity is not convincing" (p. 8).⁶ These analyses also showed that construction play (such as block building) correlated with better problem-solving while

pretend play did not (score one for the Pink Tower!). In fact, when children assign meaning to an object through pretend play, that meaning can interfere with understanding the object's true meaning and use, suggesting that pretend play doesn't improve problem-solving skills.⁷ Meaning interference is also why we don't want the children pretending the Red Rods are ski poles as this can interfere with their ability to embody the concept of length.

Finally, while there is a relationship between pretend play and intelligence, the direction of that relationship is unclear, so the claim that pretend play raises intelligence is unsubstantiated at this point.⁶

But what about pretend play's effect on social and emotional skills? Surely pretending increases these competencies as children engage in role-playing games.

It is true that researchers have claimed that both pretending alone and in a group contribute to social and emotional competencies because they allow children to play out their own social and emotional issues, and they can practice their negotiation skills.⁸ But as developmental psychologist Jerome Kagan points out, "scientists who study human nature...usually have a favored purpose in mind before they begin their work" (p. 4),⁹ and for many, play may be a good and necessary purpose for children. When analyzing the actual studies, however, they don't confirm the claims that

pretending contributes to social and emotional competencies. Overall, the studies show inconsistent correlations, which shows that a causal link between pretend play and social and emotional competencies doesn't exist.⁶ (Of course, correlation is not causation; however, if a number of studies consistently show correlational relationships between two variables in the same direction, then one can begin to make a case for causation – though very, very cautiously.)

MONTESSORI AND WORK

Dr. Montessori was fully aware that psychologists assumed that play was vital to young children's development. In a lecture presented in London in 1946, she stated:

Psychologists have attached great importance to [play] and make vague statements – that children play at this age – that they develop their character through play. They also say that the individuality of the children is revealed in their play (p.151).¹⁰

In fact, as Dr. Montessori explains in *The Secret of Childhood*, toys were available to the children in the first Montessori school, but the children rarely chose to play with them:

Since they never freely chose these toys, I realized that in the life of a child play is perhaps

something of little importance which he undertakes for lack of something better to do. A child feels that he has something of greater moment to do than to be engaged in such trivial occupations. He regards play as we would regard a game of chess or bridge. These are pleasant occupations for hours of leisure, but they would become painful if we were obliged to pursue them at great length. When we have some important business to do, bridge is forgotten. And since a child always has some important thing at hand, he is not particularly interested in playing (p. 122).¹¹

Unlike other educational reformers who sought to impose their views and ideologies upon children, Dr. Montessori developed her method through systematic observation of children. And so while she initially thought that children needed toys just as the psychologists did, the children showed her otherwise, so she removed them from the environment.

In fact, there were two other significant incidents wherein students showed their preference for Montessori's purposeful materials over toys or free play. In both situations, the children had been locked out of

their classrooms without a teacher. The first incident occurred at the first Montessori school in Rome, while the second occurred at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in 1915 where a glass classroom was set up so people could watch the children work. During both of these lockout incidents, the children could have easily chosen to stay outside and play. Instead, they chose to find a way into their classrooms so they could work. And the teachers weren't even present.¹²

I have witnessed firsthand children's preference for working in their classroom over free play. At the Montessori school I once administered, we decided one year to try running a summer camp for the primary (ages 3-6) students instead of summer school so we could give the teachers a long break. To maintain a Montessori atmosphere during camp, the children could choose what they wanted to do, and the activities included crafts, toys, and free play. A couple of weeks into the summer, we started hearing from the children and their parents that the children were bored, and they wanted to go back to working with the materials in their classrooms. We never ran another camp.

Ultimately, frolicking in mud and hanging from trees may seem like the idyllic early childhood experience, but that's only because we adults tend to perceive "work" as a pejorative term as we spend our work days counting down to the weekend. Montessori children, however, don't

because their work brings them higher affect, energy, and intrinsic motivation.¹³ Work feels good.

In fact, an examination of the broad *playful learning* construct and Montessori education found that the two have much in common: both have an overarching structure, free choice, peer interaction, materials specific to the developmental stage, a lack of extrinsic rewards, and just plain fun.¹⁴ These elements are also present during pretend play.⁶ This means that “work” in Montessori classrooms feels like play to children. In fact, it might even feel better than pretend play because the children actually get to use real tools and materials!

A FALSE DICHOTOMY

When educators advocate for play in early childhood education, they are fighting against the adult-centered, didactic instruction found in conventional schools – and with good reason. Forcing children to sit and listen to adults for long periods is not developmentally appropriate. I’m not even sure it’s appropriate for adults.¹⁵

But this dichotomy of play and work fails to consider how the two actually overlap. As education professor Joan Goodman states:

Absent clear criteria, play comes to be defined by its opposite – work – and the large overlap is lost” (p. 185).¹⁶

In her article “*Work*” Versus “*Play*” and *Early Childhood Care*, Goodman articulates how the research literature generally distinguishes work from play, but she also shows their great overlap. First, play is considered to be fun, easy, and pleasurable, while work is unpleasant and effortful. However, play can also require tremendous effort (as when one plays hard) and work can feel quite pleasurable – especially when in a state of flow, wherein you’re fully immersed in what you’re doing and time just seems to fly by.¹⁷

Second, play is about freedom while work is about constraint, obliging “us to discipline our behavior, follow rules, do what the conventional standard demands” (p. 185).¹⁶ But Goodman reminds us that children often create rules for their own play activities, as they prefer a sense of order.

Third, play is about process while work is focused on outcome. But this distinction is also erroneous. Play, like work, has an endpoint, and children often evaluate their own products of play.

Finally, play is considered to be intrinsically motivated and self-chosen, whereas work is extrinsically motivated and imposed upon us by some outside authority. This means “the very same activity . . . can be play or work,” depending upon whether or not the person is obliged to do it (p. 186). In a Montessori context, this means that all of the classroom

activities can be considered play since it is the children who choose what to do!

Because work feels like play within a Montessori context, those students learn that “work” means something one wants to do. And as Goodman states:

What seems to be the case, then, is that the criteria of play that most distinguishes it from work – its self-chosen intrinsically motivated quality – is also the quality that should imbue work; work in school and

work in the work place for that matter (p. 188).¹⁶

Hopefully, Montessori students’ experience of work as self-chosen and intrinsically motivated will lead them to spend their adult years doing work that is meaningful to them rather than spending those years counting the days down to the weekend.

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