

**‘You Can Play, Too’:
An Argument for Inclusive Play**

Knowing is not enough; we must apply.
Willing is not enough; we must do.
~Goethe

Jessica is in Kindergarten. She has a pleasant affect. She likes to talk to the other girls in her class. She likes to have the teacher praise her. At morning recess time, Jessica misses the first five minutes of recess; because she did not do her homework. She stays inside to do it. Jessica comes running across the playground when she is allowed to come outside. She walks up to four girls who are skipping arm-in-arm across the playground. She tries to lock arms with the girl on the end. The girls ignore her and skip past her – laughing and talking. Jessica notices another girl, Beth, standing near the side of the playground with a sad face. Jessica approaches the girl and asks her what is wrong. The girl tells Jessica that Amy (one of the girls in the group of girls skipping around the playground) is mad at her. Jessica listens to the story and goes over to Amy to explain Beth’s side of the story. Amy comes over (with the group of girls) and talks to Beth. The group of girls invite Beth to skip across the playground. The group again ignores Jessica who looks at the girls. Jessica wanders around the playground the rest of the recess period.

I observed this episode last November. I asked the teacher if she had noticed this incident. She had not.

Does this type of incident happen very much at school? In my experience it happens to a few children every recess. How do I know? Because part of my job as a mental health consultant is to observe children in school settings. Harris and Petrie conducted a survey of elementary school children on the topic of bullying. Almost 63% of the children reported that bullying occurred at least ‘sometimes.’ About 27% claimed bullying occurred ‘all the time.’ ‘Name calling’ was reported as the most frequent form of bullying (76%). ‘Exclusion from activities’ was reported at 66%.

Is there anything that teachers and other school personnel can do to help the children who feel alienated from their peers or who appear difficult to deal with in the school setting? Should children be permitted to choose with whom they want to play? Is it okay to include some children and exclude others? Is it OK to make denial of recess the bedrock of school discipline?

In this paper, I take the position that ‘yes, there are many things teachers can do to promote inclusive play in school settings.’ And ‘no’ adults should not be passively complicit in children’s exclusion of other children from activities.

The Status of Play in US Public Schools

Children are losing their recess time. It may be that a school has usurped the recess to increase time on academic subjects. This has been exacerbated by the push for standardized testing in the schools.

In many schools, the freedom which was once enjoyed by children at recess has been replaced by a policy of planned physical activity. The children are expected to play within the perimeters of the school's accepted play activities.

Those children who are 'problem' children often face increased strictures on their play. It is not unusual to find children identified as ADHD standing 'on the wall' for 5-10 minutes depending upon the perceived infraction. Other children will be denied part or all of their recess time because they have not completed classwork or homework. I have been told by school personnel from the superintendent to the principal to the teacher that they have no other options but to deny problem children recess.

Also, the playground is the area where most instances of exclusion occur for the children. This is attributed to several factors: 1) there is not enough staff to observe all the actions of the children, 2) adults believe children have the right to play with whomever they like, 3) children have received non-verbal messages from adults that exclusion is OK, 4) there is such a large area involved that even if adults are watching they cannot catch the words or actions that indicate exclusion, 5) adults often congregate in one area to talk and do not observe children's actions, and 6) children do not report exclusion to the adults.

Is Play Important at School?

I do not think anyone in this audience needs to be convinced of the merits of play for the young child. The child stands a head taller during play (to paraphrase Vygotsky). The child is able to move beyond herself to become the person she wants to be. The school is supposed to be all about the child the development of the child. If this is to be a reality, the school needs to take a long look at the role of play in the curriculum.

I am going to mention only a few aspects which I feel are of particular relevance to the classroom teacher.

Four points can be extracted from Vygotsky's work concerning the significance of dramatic play for the young child. A child participating in play is: 1) motivated to act in a certain way in order to continue the play experience; 2) is involved in cognitive decentering or perspective taking in order to take on a role beyond the real self; 3) utilizes mental representations to make the environment more than it is; and 4) deliberate in action or exhibits self-regulation to maintain the flow of play with others and within a certain theme.

A teacher working with children who are difficult to handle in the school setting should look at these points and say, "If I make the learning experiences playful, the children are more likely to be motivated to learn. I want the children to be able to see things from a variety of perspectives. Play can help with that. The ability to use mental representations is a step on the road to abstraction. Play is a medium for this. If I want the children to be self-regulators, play is a perfect avenue to do this."

Segal talks about three benefits of pretend play that can be realized through the school. First, the children learn much about making and keeping friends. They learn to enter and exit play gracefully. They learn to negotiate and decenter. Second, children develop their thinking and especially problem-solving skills. Third, play is an avenue for children to learn to feel good about themselves. They go beyond themselves, they take on a more competent persona. They can work through or experiment with solutions to the problems that are bothering them in real life.

Identification/Observation

In my opinion, the premium value of play at school lies in the window it provides to the observer of a child's ability, skills, thoughts, and feelings. If a teacher takes time to watch a child, she can note things such as a child's language ability, negotiation skills, and physical prowess.

However, teachers do not have the opportunity to observe the children in their class for extended periods of time. A teacher shares recess duty with the other teachers in the school. A classroom teacher not only sees her class on an irregular basis, but she also has to supervise many other children from other classes at the same time. A teacher does not have the opportunity to observe her class. She spends her being a mediator or policewoman on the playground.

If the teacher had the information which could be gleaned from playground observations, she would be better able to address the strengths and weaknesses of the children in her class. For example, she could notice the excluded child and plan interventions to help that child. Or she could notice the 'problem' child strikes another boy, because he was not allowed to play basketball with a group of boys. The teacher could prepare a series of lessons on respect, conflict resolution, and perspective-taking.

Classroom

There are six major aspects of the classroom that can readily be addressed by the teacher. These aspects frequently overlap, therefore, they should be used as parts of an integrated program for the development of a healthy social-emotional climate in the classroom.

Respect: It should be made evident from day one that no disrespect will be tolerated toward anyone – adult or child. Children are to use manners, address others by name, and to help when it is within the individual's ability to do so. The adults are to listen to the children when the children come to them with concerns. There needs to be a school-wide policy of 'no bullying allowed.'

Morning Meetings: It can be helpful to have morning meetings each day. At this time, the children can examine different issues that can promote a sense of community in the classroom. The teacher can discuss various issues with the children such as: 1) rules and routines to keep the classroom pleasant, 2) difficulties following the rules and routines, 3) sharing time to allow the children to get to know each other, and 4) perspective-taking in difficult situations.

Lessons: The teacher should plan regular lessons dealing with social-emotional issues. The children need to examine such concepts as: 1) making and keeping friends, 2) conflict resolution strategies, 3) perspective-taking, 4) peacekeeping/peacemaking, and 5) problem-solving in a variety of situations.

Buddies: The teacher can assign each child to have a 'buddy' during the school year. As a 'buddy', a child is responsible for helping his/her partner in various aspects of school life, e.g. remembering homework, reminders of school rules, reminders of upcoming activities, reading to each other, etc.

The teacher can rotate these pairings of buddies throughout the year so the children have opportunities to interact with a variety of children.

Storytime: The teacher can read and discuss a variety of books that deal with social-emotional issues with the children. (A list of books for young children is provided

at the end of this paper.). These books open up a safe avenue for the teacher to discuss some sensitive issues with the children.

Role-Play and Puppet-Play: Young children enjoy interacting with puppets in the classroom. Again, the teacher can get the children to discuss sensitive topics with a puppet that they would not discuss without a puppet.

Parents/Home

The teacher can do several things to help parents in the difficult job of raising socially responsible and responsive children. The teacher should institute as many of these techniques as possible.

Communication:

The school, especially the classroom teacher, must contact the families early and with positive messages. In this way, the families feel safe coming to school to ask questions or to address problems that arise. A variety of media should be used.

Interactive Homework:

Get the parents involved in their children's academic pursuits. These activities reap several benefits, such as, the parents are informed of the curriculum, aids communication between children and parents, makes the parent an ally of the children and the school, etc.

Participation in the Function of the Classroom:

The parents can help at home or at school. When parents are at school, they are more likely to see their children's behavior and monitor the activities of other children in the school.

Interagency Cooperation

School personnel need to be more open and accepting of mental health professionals from outside agencies who interact with many of the families in the school. If there was more communication and cooperation between the school and the agencies, the children would receive more coordinated and comprehensive mental health services.

Playground

There should be enough staff to monitor different areas of the playground. Staff can aid the excluded children in entering play groups on the playground. Staff can help children with negotiation and conflict resolution skills. Teachers can stop taking recess away from children.

Note: This is a summary of a presentation for:
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Books for Children about Bullying

Bully. Judith Caseley

I Can Speak Up. Sarah Levete

If I Had a Robot. Dan Yaccarino

Nobody Knew What To Do: A Story About Bullying. Becky Ray McCain

Rachel Parker, Kindergarten Show-Off. Ann Martin

The Recess Queen. Alexis O'Neill

Stand Tall, Molly Lou Melon. Patty Lovell