



PLAY AND THE BELIEVER

Why Christians need to let children play

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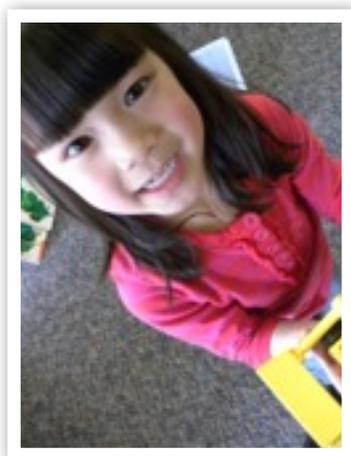
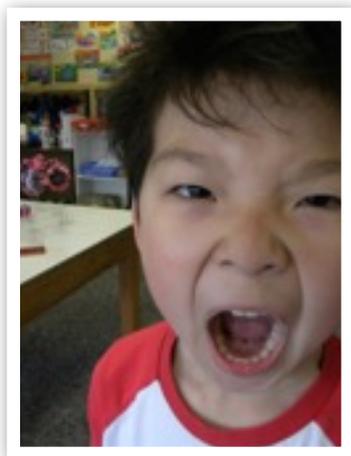
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Why bother with play?



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Another carefree, summer day

The sun was shining in beautiful British Columbia and this kindergarten teacher was well-rested. Just another summer day to recuperate from an intense year of teaching 5-year-olds and to rejuvenate for the upcoming September.

My email inbox greets me with an interesting Groupon offer: Back to school deals. Naturally, I investigate. What I discover makes me cringe with sadness and regret (see above photo).

Send your kids back to work!

Beautiful children (clip art, I'm sure), dressed for the office, smiling at the camera. Their expressions and posture clearly shows that they're equipped to learn, with nary an intention to be fired.

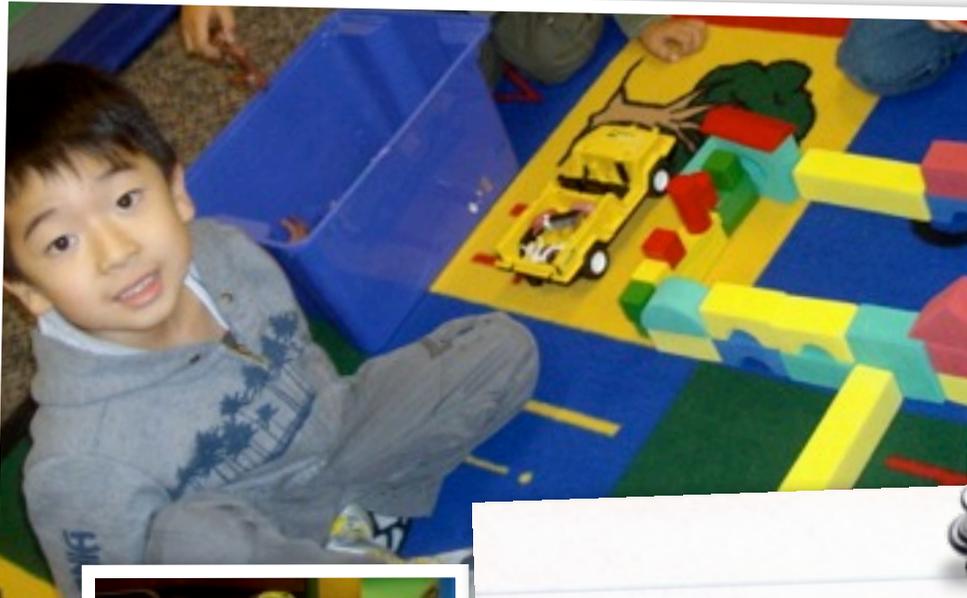
Fired from learning. School, a place where children ought to be eager to learn and grow, is equated to the rat race. The corporate ladder. The dog eat dog world.

Representation

This is popular culture's perception of school, and presumably of learning, as school is accepted as the standard norm of learning and education in broad North American society and beyond. This representation is anxiety-ridden, competition-driven, and demotivating to young learners whose natural inclination towards curiosity, discovery, exploration - *learning* - must be fostered and nurtured in high-quality environments and by developmentally appropriate, best practices.

Let us shine

As educators and supporters of Richmond Christian School and believers in this postmodern, predominantly North American culture, we must develop high quality environments and developmentally appropriate, best practices "in obedience to the infallible Word of God and led by His Spirit" to ensure our children have "a quality, Christ centred education," equipping them to "joyfully serve Christ in all aspects of life." (RCS mission statement)



Play is...

- ◆ *Pleasurable & enjoyable*
 - ◆ *Has no extrinsic goals*
 - ◆ *Is spontaneous*
 - ◆ *Involves active engagement*
 - ◆ *Is generally engrossing*
 - ◆ *Often has a private reality*
 - ◆ *Is nonliteral*
 - ◆ *Can have certain elements of make-believe*
- (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, October 2008 *Why play = learning*)

Play is our need to adapt the world to ourselves and create new learning experiences.

David Elkind

Accessibility to current research and information on learning through play and the benefits of play is not limited to educational professionals and researchers. A quick google search or delve into quality parenting sites will reveal a plethora of information regarding this subject. A definition of authentic and beneficial play is necessary so that we can consider the topic of play in the believer's life.

In the title of Dr. David Elkind's recent book, *The Power of Play: how spontaneous, imaginative activities lead to happier, healthier children*, Elkind emphasizes spontaneity and imagination as elements of authentic play.

Below is a more detailed explanation of play elements taken from a local publication *The Child Care Professional*, by the YMCA.

Authentic play is:

- Pleasurable & enjoyable, voluntary & self-initiated
- Self sustaining without extrinsic motivations, rewards, coercion or reinforcement
- Not dependent on extrinsic goals, that is the process itself is more important
- Spontaneous & flexible, fluid
- Involves active imagination with changing 'rules' & boundaries
- Generally all engrossing, absorbing sustained attention & focused engagement
- Often related to private reality based on children's unique experiences
- Composed of flights of imagination
- Can be alone or with peers

(Stephens, Spring 2010. *Imaginative play during childhood: required for reaching full potential*)

Why is play important to development?

In the secular world...

Throughout the world, play is recognized by educational professionals as the optimal learning mode for young children. In the province of British Columbia, the Ministry of Education develops documents to guide educators of young children. The British Columbia Early Learning Framework maintains that play is important and significant in children's lives. It is vital and recognized by the United Nations as a specific right of the child.

In the Ministry of Education's document, *The Primary Program*, play continues to be emphasized an important part of learning in the primary years of school. The document includes 12 different types of play and the skills children develop in the process.

Full potential

An article Karen Stephens in the Spring 2010 edition of the YMCA Child Care Professional magazine directs attention to specific skills, knowledge and dispositions that children acquire through ample creative play.

From Stephen's article [Imaginative play during childhood: required for reaching full potential](#), children develop:

- Abstract & symbolic thinking, decision-making, creative problem solving & goal setting
- Complex language development & ability to 'self-talk' through learning steps
- Emotional awareness & competence, identity & self-image development, ability to maintain self-control through self-regulation, stress management & ability to delay gratification
- Social skills such as patience, cooperation, negotiation, non-violent conflict resolution, teamwork, sharing, considering other's point of view
- Formation of a moral or ethical code that distinguish right from wrong, respect for others' rights & ability to work toward the greater good

Making sense

Through play, children process their knowledge and formulate understanding of the world around them. They are making sense of what they have learned, or are learning, in an authentic and experiential way. Observant parents often share stories about how their children incorporate 'big ideas' in their play, e.g. New siblings, adult work, death. Through the process, children gain a deeper understanding of life development and changes as play provides experience in a safe, low-risk situation.

Further resources

Continue to investigate or bookmark these following resources regarding the impact of learning through play.

- [KaBoom!](#) Is an American nonprofit dedicated to saving play for children.
- Dr. David Elkind's *The power of play: how spontaneous, imaginative activities lead to happier, healthier children*
- An article published by the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development titled *Why play = learning*, by Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and Roberta Michnick Golinkoff
- Vivian Gussin Paley's book *A child's work: the importance of fantasy play*,

which illustrates anecdotal observations of how children make sense of their world through play.



What is the crisis in play?

Since play is such an important factor of excellent childhood development and learning, what is the problem, the crisis that concern educators and discerning parents? Why is a document as such even necessary?

In *Crisis in the kindergarten: why children need to play in school*, Edward Miller and Joan Almon describe the crisis as young children being exposed to practices of teaching and learning, not well grounded in research, which violate known principles of good development and teaching. Children's growth and health are compromised in this way. Miller and Almon explain to great lengths the current state of kindergarten schooling, particularly in the United States though in some respects applicable to Canadian schools. They provide a sample of data and research studies illustrating the potential harm and ill-effects of the lack of play in these early years. Find the [document online](#) at www.allianceforchildhood.org

Cultural landscape of play

Respected play proponent and Professor of Child Development at Eliot-Person Department of Child Development at Tufts University, David Elkind, describes how play has changed through the decades, particularly in North American society. In his book *The power of play: how spontaneous, imaginative activities lead to happier, healthier children*, Elkind describes the learning that occurs through authentic play and how that has deteriorated through modern toys, increased screen time

and parental angst regarding child growth and development. Furthermore, valuing competition and individual success alongside consumerism and materialism has created misunderstandings about how young children learn. Elkind highlights educational toys and methods on the market that are developmentally inappropriate for young children to use as such.

Crisis

In an adapted article for the Alliance for Childhood, authors Joan Almon and Edward Miller highlights data that show increasing school expulsions for young children resulting from stress due to little playtime. This inappropriate elimination of play time in favor of more teacher-directed learning time leads to the loss of creativity and curiosity, qualities that are crucial for fostering lifelong learners continuing in education.

On the horizon

Fortunately for benefit of the future and its generations, there is increasing awareness that learning through play is the developmentally best practice for early childhood learning. In the United States, there are nonprofit organizations such as the Alliance for Childhood and KaBoom! that advocate for children and play.

In the media, there is increasing exposure to the detriments and shortfalls of the current state of early education. More attention is being given to restoring play for children as educational, beneficial and productive.

Click on the links below to read articles.

- [NY Times article](#)
- [Huffington Post article](#)
- [Globe & Mail](#)
- [The Province](#)



Play & the believer



Why is play important to us?

In the document, *Why play = learning*, the writers conclude that there is a “devalue of play in our culture.” Unfortunately, this is often the case in our community of believers - we are not the exception. But should we be the exception?

The Alliance for Childhood promotes play, and in a poem written for the organization, there is evidence of what the secular world considers a good childhood. The poem states that children need to learn “the essentials/ about the heavenly world and the earthly/ about goodness, beauty and truth.”

Who best to teach children about these godly principles? Of course for followers, the person is the Holy Spirit. Further in the poem, “Children need to be introduced to a life of principles,” -

again purposing that this is best practice to begin learning these standards in childhood. As believers, we have fallen short of high, godly standards by devaluing play and its subsequent learning opportunities. We need to advocate and promote play for early childhood learning so that we can best equip students “to serve God joyfully in all areas of life.”

God has purposed for children to know Jesus through living, learning and growing. While this purpose may foreshadow His will for their future and grown up life, it is also the purpose for each child’s present living. The Alliance for Childhood’s poem evidences these purposes omitting the foundational belief in Jesus. Not only are children equipped for the future through achieving these purposes, but the process itself and

achievement of which is also the goal of the present moment.

At Richmond Christian School, we are journeying towards a high level of developmentally appropriate best practices in early childhood education. To best equip children to fulfill their present and future purposes as intended by God, we aim to provide quality education for children to know Jesus through living, learning and growing. Our students currently have child-directed free play time, teacher-directed playful learning time, and teacher-directed lessons. A high quality early educational program will consist mainly of child-directed learning - play - time with strong educator support and training to assess and evaluate individual development.

Christian schooling

What does God think about this?

In the book *12 Affirmations 2.0: Christian schooling for a changing world*, educator Stephen Vryhof identifies 12 principles that set apart Christian education from typical, secular schooling. The principles, called affirmations, are categorized into three sections, foundational, educational and communal.

Play & Christian schooling

Vryhof's identifies four foundational affirmations that Christian schools are based upon: 1] clarifying and applying a mission statement, 2] developing an optimistic theo-centric worldview, 3] cultivating cultural discernment, 4] fostering caring engagement.

As children live out "daily life" in a "grace-filled community," where their play is alongside and negotiated with other community members, we are actively "cultivating cultural discernment" as children are given the opportune safe space to develop these skills. This safe place fosters caring engagement so that biblical concepts of "stewardship, peacemaking, justice, and compassion" have authenticity in children's experiences as they make sense of their world, navigating play experiences with their peers.

Play & educational affirmations

Affirmations five through eight identifies educational principles that quality Christian schooling must: 5] prepare for & participate in a changing world, 6] address real problems & generate real products, 7] build essential understandings & life skills, 8] attend to each individual's development.

Play prepares children for participating in a changing world as the skills developed through this method equip children to serve Christ in a different future. As children process real experiences through their play situations, it provides authentic opportunities to develop skills for problem solving, creativity and ingenuity. Also through these experiences, children build essential understandings and life skills. In her book *A child's work: the importance of fantasy play*, educator Vivian Gussin Paley documents her observations of young children's fantasy play incorporating serious ideas such as friendship, death and discrimination. In a [project described in the Early Childhood Research & Practice Online Journal](#), the author relates how preschool

aged (2 years to 5 years) children incorporate their understanding of birth, babies and development in their play situations.

Play & God's Word

God created children to be playful, imaginative, creative, curious, and eager. Children generally display innocence, wonder and humility - an innate sense of reliance on others, in particular their caregivers - these are some characteristics that come to mind when reflecting on childhood. Jesus calls people to be "like children," that is to have the same characteristics, humility, innocence, eagerness, that children express, so that they can be a part of the kingdom of heaven. Play is a universal method of learning and expression in children's lives, no matter their race or background. It is often easily accessible and used as a tool for children to learn about God within their play. Children must learn who they are in light of scripture: that they are beloved, though fallen and imperfect. With guiding, Christian teachers at the helm, this truth can be perceived by the students. As children study scripture, the very truths and principles they learn will be evidenced in their play. Authentic experience of God's truth will soften their hearts towards God's work in the lives of young children. Play is the natural, self-initiated and authentic experience of God's story.

Excellence

When RCS educators strive for excellence in teaching early childhood education through play-based learning, we are demonstrating the school's mission statement for students and families. This standard is a high calling; we obey God by desiring excellence while relying on Him to equip us as teachers, made possible through His Spirit working in our lives. God enables us to be fulfill the mission of our, ultimately of His, school.



Playing & learning at RCS



Why must we advocate for play-based learning at RCS?

As a Christian community, Vryhof identifies four communal affirmations that set us apart from traditional and current educational standards. These affirmations confirm the relational purpose God intended for people. Through play-based learning, early childhood learners best experience these nurturing relationships, building upon what they acquire for lasting, eternal relationships.

Vryhof advises that as a community of believers, our choices must be guided upon mutual trust, cooperation and shared seriousness as in a covenant, not a business contract. This standard is different from the world's in which people, usually parents, trade money for services: educating children.

Finally, through an environment of play, this Christian education community can foster different roles, school structure and responsiveness to needs. A primarily play-based early education program responds to the needs of young learners and shifts the teacher's role as observer, guide and assessor in student learning. This shift in method and role is practical

and responsive as teachers are able to individualize each student's unique development and interests.

What questions and considerations do early childhood educators at RCS have to examine to implement best practices, or change current practices, for optimal play-based learning?

There is much to consider when evaluating current practices for purposes of improvement. As already discussed, our school community is unique. The standards we maintain as an educational institution is secondary, and subordinate, to our calling as a Christ-following community. Yet, they are not distinct entities working separate from each other. As a Christian school, our standards for educational and obedience to God work hand-in-hand, intertwined. This connection is crucial for students, to equip them with the understanding that being a child and follower of Jesus encompasses all aspects of life.

The following questions may or may not have answers in our current classrooms. Perhaps answers can be partially found in our early learning spaces. I encourage you to contemplate these questions, try to develop understandings. Come up with questions of your own and dialogue with staff. As a community of believers, we are always in conversation, building relationships and growing in Christ.

Food for thought

- How much time and opportunity do we (or can we) afford for early learners in self-initiated free play?

- How do early childhood educators use observations of children's play to guide and facilitate development in different learning areas?

- What is a good balance between teacher-led playful learning versus student-led learning through play? What might an appropriate balance look like?

- What strategies, materials and methods do we use to foster student-led learning through play? Consider particular types of materials, stories, real-life experiences, and discussions; field trips, interest-based materials and experiences.

What next?

As members in this growing community, we all have a vested interest in our early childhood program whether or not we have day-to-day interactions with this age group. A high quality, developmentally appropriate early learning program contributes towards our community through its families and learners.

God has equipped us with everything necessary for excellence: Himself. Let us put on Christ to fulfill our mission in ourselves 77as we equip others to do the same.

God created play as a natural, effective way for people to learn about and make sense of the world around them. We must value this opportunity in our students' lives and equip them to fulfill their purposes according to His will.

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