

Chapter 4

Free w/
Homemade
toy
Assignment

Play as Curriculum

Chapter 4 of your text focuses on play, an important part of the infant-toddler curriculum. Part of that chapter relates directly to what Anna Tardos had to say at a conference in Los Angeles¹ about how caregivers facilitate play at Loczy, the Pikler Institute in Budapest.

Reading 4

Facilitating the Play of Children at Loczy

Anna Tardos

Anna Tardos is child psychologist and the daughter of Emmi Pikler. She is also the director of the Pikler Institute in Budapest, which is nicknamed Loczy.

Playing in the usual sense is considered as starting at an age when the child is able to have, at the same time, two levels of awareness. While being aware of reality, he or she is also aware of the fantasy aspect of the play situation. But I am going to talk about play in a broader sense. When I refer to play, I mean a chance for uninhibited free activity, in most cases using an object to play with.

The starting point of our view is that play is simply the activity of children. Researchers have learned how an infant proceeds from one stage to another in her play development by observing children themselves. In no way do we see our task to teach children how to play or stimulate them to play. We are learning from the children how to play, rather than the children learning from us.

Our basic premise in facilitating children's play is that our help must always be indirect. We offer possibilities; the child makes the choice. For examples, it is our task to provide toys, but we never put any toy into the infant's hand.

In what way then do we promote or encourage play? First, we organize a peaceful, quiet environment. Contrary to general opinion found in the literature that infants should be inundated with stimuli, our opinion is that the young infant must be protected from too much stimuli. For example, for this reason we do not put young babies in the play pen for the first two-and-a-half to three months. We do not put any toys, especially the noisy ones, in his crib, neither during the first months nor later. We talk and move quietly in the room or outdoors, on the terrace and even in the yard, not only when the children are asleep, but also when they are awake and playing. We ask, for example, observers to close the door quietly when leaving.

¹ (Excerpt from a Lecture given at "More than Play" Conference, June 29, 1985, Los Angeles, California)

Secondly, we provide sufficient space for infants in which to move freely. Movement is one of the basic needs of infants. If you look at an infant from a distance, you can determine whether he or she is asleep or awake by seeing his body moving or being quiet. In our experience, infants' play activities are enhanced when they are not restricted from gross motor activities, such as changing position and changing places.

Space allocated for the play area is always somewhat larger than infants can use. For example, the infant who is just turning himself over is given space large enough for rolling. A rolling child is given space large enough for crawling or creeping. ✓

Thirdly, the infant's play territory is fenced-in and safe from real dangers. Boundaries make it possible for the infant to become acquainted with each corner of his territory. He or she can repeatedly go to the same corner and find the same characteristic of the play area. This gives him the feeling of familiarity. If the space is too large, it is difficult for the infant to get acquainted with. That is our opinion.

A fenced-in area makes it possible to keep danger out. I want to mention, however, that we do not consider all unpleasant experiences in the course of play dangerous. Perhaps you would like me to tell you an example. If a child hits his head on the hard wooden floor, this is not really dangerous; rather this is going to be a useful experience, and will teach the child to be more careful. But unexpected real accidents can hurt the infant's desire for autonomous activity. He may lose confidence in moving and activity. For example, if the chair he is holding onto tips over and hits the child, this is a real danger.

Real danger causes the adult in charge to interfere in the child's action, and hampers the infant's activity. In this case the adult must continually say, "Do not do this, do not touch that," and this will hamper and restrict the child, disturbing movement and activity.

The fourth important element in facilitating the play of infants is the choice of objects. We find that the opportunities for activity offered by the objects are more important than the adult appeal of the object. Thus, few of the toys we give to infants emit sound, especially not the first toys. In our opinion, the more simple the toy, the more suitable for infants' use. Sparkling, glittering and sound-producing toys elicit surprise, but do not promote a variety of activities. Such toys reduce the infant's sensitivity threshold, and the infant then needs ever-more sophisticated toys to induce a response. This would be similar to a drug-induced effect.

In contrast to this would be a colored cotton scarf. It introduces no sound, it is not sparkling, it is not glittery, but becomes engrossing through its capacity to produce many variants of movement, and it is also safe.

When we offer the child a toy, it is important that it should provide opportunities for play consistent with the child's current and future capacity for activity. For example, we offer many hollow objects even before the child is ready for the activity of putting something inside. I wish to emphasize that we always present that which is attainable, and it is always the child who decides which toy to play with and what the play will be. For example, he or she may want to just swat the hollow objects.

These are only some small examples of our approach to facilitating the play of young children.

Questions about Reading 4

1. You may have had some reactions and feelings as you read this excerpt from Anna Tardos's speech. If you did, what was it specifically that you were reacting to? What were your feelings? Do you have some ideas about why you had those reactions?

2. Why do you think adults tend to buy glittery toys that make noises and surprise infants? Do you agree with Anna that simple toys are better?

3. Novelty and surprise are valued by many in the United States. Do you think the simple toys and lack of surprises are a cultural difference between Americans of the dominant culture and Hungarians?