

Chapter 7

Using Technology in the World of Play

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ABSTRACT

Child development experts have been raising alarms about the increasingly didactic and test-driven path of early childhood education as many programs eliminate play from their schedules. This limits the potential of technology use in play which is a natural combination for young children as play technologies become globally accepted as leisure time and learning activities. Play and technology both have their unique place in society and are often thought of as two separate entities. However, in today's technology driven world, the separateness of the two is no longer as apparent as the two are beginning to blend. This blend is exciting but leaves educators with questions. Specifically, questions related to the following: (a) How do educators ensure that the child is challenged in every developmental domain and (b) How do educators create and facilitate opportunities for exposure to the traditional stages of play while also making sure that the child stays abreast of the latest and greatest technological advances? This chapter begins with the history of play and walks the reader to the issues educators are facing when technology and play merge.

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INTRODUCTION: PLAY

With the 21st century being technology driven, children are being exposed and introduced to technology starting at a very young age and their parents are being bombarded with advertisements by companies espousing their products to make children smarter, early readers, and even “baby Einstein’s”. While these claims may be true for some children as technology may actually assist with earlier development in the areas of cognition, critical thinking skills, and fine motor coordination, these statements are not universal and often leave parents and teachers with more questions than answers as they strive to provide the child with the best in technology without stripping the child of the traditional gains well documented to be achieved through play. Studies conducted by researchers from U.C.L.A., Long Island University, and Sarah Lawrence College in New York have raised some concerns about the status of play in early childhood programs. The researchers found that:

- On a typical day, kindergartners in Los Angeles and New York City spend four to six times as long being instructed and tested in literacy and math (two to three hours per day) as in free play or “choice time” (30 minutes or less).
- Standardized testing and preparation for tests are now a daily activity in most of the kindergartens studied, despite the fact that the use of most such tests with children under age eight is scientifically invalid and leads to harmful labeling.
- In many kindergarten classrooms there is no playtime at all. Teachers say the curriculum does not incorporate play, there isn’t time for it, and many school administrators do not value it.
- Play in all its forms, but especially open-ended child-initiated play, is now a minor activity, if not completely eliminated, in the

kindergartens assessed. Teacher-directed activities, especially instruction in literacy and math, are taking up the lion’s share of classroom time. Standardized testing and preparation for tests are now a daily activity in most of these kindergartens.

- Most teachers in the two new studies of New York City and Los Angeles kindergartens say they spend two to three hours each day in literacy, math, and test prep—and that children have 30 minutes or less each day for play or “choice time.”
- In Los Angeles, 25 percent of the teachers surveyed said there was no time at all for free play in their kindergartens.

Miller & Almon (2009)

This issue is further compounded by the addition of technology resistance in many early childhood programs. It is unclear how much technology is used in these classrooms and how it is used. We do know that there has been much controversy about the use of technology such as computers and software in this educational group. However there is evidence for support of technology and play in many countries. In Taiwan accessing internet or playing with computer software/video games is a very popular leisure activity for children and young adolescents in Taiwan (Tseng & Liang, 2002). Besides its’ entertaining function, computers have been considered as multifunctional learning tools and toys to help children’s cognitive development in many studies. (Lee, 2009) Japanese early childhood educators integrate play and technology in order to support children’s development and learning in group-oriented environments (Ogawa & Izumi-Taylor, 2009). Watching children playing with technologies, old and new, in early childhood centers in New Zealand, teachers amaze in the child’s abilities and passions (Gibbons, 2009). Lopez (in press) reports that Mexico, Latin American countries and Spain all support technology and

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