Speaking Out for Play-Based Learning

Becoming an Effective Advocate for Play in the Early Childhood Classroom

by Susan J. Oliver and Edgar Klugman

Susan Oliver is executive director of the national non-profit organization Playing for Keeps. She devotes her time to promoting and protecting the role of play in our culture. Prior to her association with Playing for Keeps, Ms. Oliver served in various positions at the National Lekotek Center, a national non-profit organization dedicated to making play accessible to children with disabilities and the Family Resource Coalition of America, a national non-profit organization committed to building community-based support and resources for children and families.

Edgar Klugman is the co-founder of Playing for Keeps as well as professor emeritus of Early Childhood Education and Care at Wheelock College in Boston, Massachusetts. He is also a charter member of the Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum within the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Among his publications are *Play, Policy and Practice* (Redleaf Press), and *Children's Play and Learning: Perspectives and Policy Implications* (edited with Smilansky; Teachers College Press). He currently serves on the board of New England AEYC.

October 20, 2002: The *Chicago Tribune* reports that "blocks, dolls, and the toy kitchen were banned from Mary Lauren Tenney's kindergarten classroom last year in Knoxville, Tennessee." In Chicago, the science, art, and dramatic play areas a public school kindergarten teacher envisioned in her classroom were prohibited by school administrators who "expected kindergartners to sit all day at desks, go without recess, and learn to read by year's end." (Brandon, 2002)

October 29, 2003: It's news important enough for coverage in the *New York Times*. Four-year-old Head Start student Nate Kidder "arrived at school . . . with an eager smile that morning. It was his turn to be his teacher's helper." Instead, Nate — now clearly nervous — was in the middle of 'a historic moment in early education: more than half a million four year olds in Head Start programs around the country were taking their first standardized test that day.' "Most of us in early childhood are very nurturing people," commented Jana Little, Nate's teacher. For Mrs. Little and her colleagues, "building confidence — as well as teaching children how to be part of a classroom and not disrupt it, and how to share — is just as important preparation for kindergarten as vocabulary words" (Rimer, 2003).

Changing expectations

The expectations of early childhood classrooms are changing. Our culture is becoming increasingly focused on the achievement of functional skills (e.g. pre-literacy and elementary arithmetic manipulations) as the objective of early childhood education. Often teachers are finding that child-centered, play-based learning — otherwise known as "developmentally appropriate practice" for young children — is losing ground to adult-directed, instruction-based philosophies. Experienced teachers who know the promise of play from both their study of child development theory and their observations of children learning in the classroom are now finding that they may have to advocate for one of the once unquestioned rituals of early childhood — children learning at their own individual pace through the natural process of play.

The role of classroom teachers in advocating for play-based learning

If you feel that children's play and play-based learning needs to be the driving philosophy in your school or center, and you hope for someone to step up and lead the charge, take a look in the mirror. As a director or teacher, you are uniquely suited to bring your knowledge, experience, and passion about this issue to colleagues, parents, and the community with the goal of influencing the values that guide decisions about their children's education.

"Advocacy means amplifying the voice," says John Samuel, the executive director of the National Centre for Advocacy Studies (based in India). It is often perceived as "a systematic process of influencing public policies," he says,

but points out that "while policy change is *necessary*, it is *not sufficient* to transform the structures, attitudes, and values that are at the root" of societal issues. In other words, efforts to impact hearts and minds at the grassroots level are just as important as mounting a formal, organized campaign to make sweeping policy change. And on the issue of educational philosophies guiding our classrooms day in and day out, who is in a better position to influence colleagues and parents than those closest to the kids and the action? That means you, the classroom teacher.

The starting point: clarifying your own philosophy and values

If you want to speak out for play-based learning for young children, the first step is to clarify your own philosophy about how children learn best and most naturally. Advocacy begins with your own beliefs, values, and knowledge. If you want to brush up on some of the literature about the role of early childhood play, you can find a review of some of the key research in our article that appeared in the September/October 2002 issue of *Child Care Information Exchange* titled "What We Know about Play: A Walk Through Selected Research." (Visit www.ccie.com to find this article.) You can also find a large number of research-based resources about play on the Playing for Keeps web site at www.playingforkeeps.org. Remember, your leadership on the issue will be most respected when it is grounded in the knowledge-base and driven by your hands-on experience in the classroom.

Strengthen your communication skills

If you find yourself compelled to speak out for play-based learning, this may be a good time to do a tune-up on your communications skills. You're strong at communicating with children. How do you do with adults? It's not only a matter of making sure your speaking and writing skills are effective, it's also about crafting a simple, consistent, convincing message that links play to learning.

Develop ways to link play with outcome words that are meaningful to parents and administrators. For example, instead of reporting "just the facts" to parents during pick-up time ("Rachel and Emily built a snowman"; "Josh played Chutes and Ladders with Daniel"), translate that play into specific learning for parents.

- "Rachel and Emily learned some new concepts about circumference when they built that snowman."
- "Josh mastered a new social skill today when he was playing Chutes and Ladders with Daniel."

Another useful technique is to choose two or three illustrative anecdotes from your own experience in the classroom over the years about children learning through play (see the story of Miss Green below) and polish them up into interesting, compelling, effective stories that make the point. Keep them ready, on the tip of your tongue, for any time you may need to use them.

Document what you know about the link between play and learning

As a classroom teacher or an administrator, you are in the position to see learning through play on a daily basis. Your challenge is to document it in a way that can be understood by those you seek to influence. Take a look in the classroom, on the playground, in the cafeteria, on field trips, and in the community and see what kind of play a child or a group of children initiates.

Whether you jot a note to yourself to document the activity or take a quick digital photo or record it on videotape, this documentation is the beginning of effective advocacy. See the sidebar on page 27 for tips on building your own record of what children accomplish through play.

An example of the process of documentation is described in the sidebar about Miss Green's field trip. While time constraints will not permit recording every learning experience with this level of detail, try to capture a handful each year to build your own base of useful anecdotes.

What were the learnings? How could Miss Green communicate these to the children — and more importantly for advocacy purposes — to the parents and others who might visit the classroom? Miss Green encouraged the children to continue talking about the experience. She recorded the children's daily observations, discussions, and continued elaborations. She posted their artwork about the event on bulletin boards and helped them write a class story about the construction site titled "A Mall Comes to Our Room."

Miss Green translated the many dimensions of the play's cognitive, creative, and imaginative activities into examples of language, literacy, and arithmetic learning for parents and others. For example, the children's replication of the site in the classroom required them to use concepts of length (the site) and depth (the hole being dug). Role playing involved use of imagination, language, problem solving, verbalization, and more — all skill-building that parents and others can understand when play is translated into its learning components.

Spreading the word

Teachers who actively advocate for play can often identify a long list of ways to spread the word. Miss Green's type of

"story" can be used in a variety of ways: in school newsletters, on bulletin boards, in presentations at open houses, in a backpack stuffer decorated by the children, in staff meetings, in community meetings, on the school web site, etc. Remember that a key point of the effort is *to make understood the connection between play and learning* so your audience will grasp, perhaps immediately or perhaps through a series of communications over time, why they too may want to join the effort to advocate for play-based classrooms.

Another technique for getting the message out may be through the mass media in your city or town. Some small community newspapers may appreciate warm human interest photos and stories and may be willing to print your report on the field trip. Some field trips could be designed to get media coverage (e.g., your children visit town hall and meet the mayor), which may give you the opportunity to point out on camera that the visit is likely to be a source of imaginative play material in the classroom for several days as the children act out what they experience.

If you want media coverage as a way to promote play-based learning, you don't have to wait for a reporter to discover what you are doing. Simply identify the local reporters who cover education or family issues, give them a call, and get to know them. They often appreciate knowing to whom in the community they can turn for reliable information or stories when they are on a tight deadline, and you can make yourself one of those people. Remember, if you have the opportunity for media coverage, either through writing a story yourself or via an interview with a reporter, your job as an advocate goes beyond merely telling the story. You want to translate the story into an example of the point you want to make, which is that play-based learning is the natural, most effective way for most children to learn.

The teacher as policy maker

While you're getting used to your new role as advocate for play-based learning in the classroom, perhaps the words of Mahatma Ghandi can be a powerful inspiration: "Be the change you want."

And don't underestimate the impact of what you do. Grassroots efforts and one-to-one influences have always been the base of important and enduring change. As a teacher, noted former Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, you are in the position to make a powerful difference in the lives of children. "You are the experts. You are the policy-makers. And you are the teachers and educators who can profoundly impact the future education and well-being of millions of American children" (Riley, 2000).

References

Brandon, K. (October 20, 2002). "Kindergarten less playful as pressure to achieve grows." *Chicago Tribune*. www.chicagotribune.com/

Learning Leads to Play and Play Leads to Learning

Miss Green took her class of 16 five year olds on a field trip to a nearby construction site. A big 18-wheeler truck, a bulldozer, men and women wearing hard hats, red and yellow barriers marked "DANGER: KEEP OUT" surrounded the site.

The children and the teacher approached the foreman of the construction site, who was aware the class would be visiting and was prepared to welcome the children. Miss Green introduced the foreman to the group; and the children very quickly proceeded to ask many questions about the site, the people working there, and the many construction vehicles.

"Why are you wearing that hat?"
"Do we have to wear a hat?"
"What is a foreman?"
"What do these women do?'
"What happens at night when no one is here?"
"What does the bulldozer do?"

Miss Green asked a parent who accompanied the group to take digital photos of the children, the different activities, and the equipment at the site, as well as to record the many questions posed by the children.

Upon return to the classroom a careful display of the photos and the questions children raised became part of the next few days' circle time discussion. At activity time a small group of children decided to work in the block corner — mostly boys but also one of the girls. They all agreed to become "hard hat players" at a construction site.

Among the six playing construction workers, the children began to use available materials to dress up and take roles of people they had seen. The foreman required a cell phone, hard hat, and pencil behind his ear, observed one of the children. "Can a girl be a foreman?" asked the girl who was participating. After all the roles were settled, the group went to work outlining the construction site. They busily used the photos to make sure they would replicate some of the pathways, scaffoldings, and the big hole the bulldozer had to dig out.

This type of play continued for many days by this group as they explored what they saw at the construction site.

news/nationworld/chi-0210200395oct20,0,4863357.story?coll=chi-news-hed.

Cohen, L., & Waite-Stupiansky, S. (November 2, 2001). "Documenting Children's Play." Presentation at the National Association for the Education of Young Children Conference in Anaheim, CA.

Riley, R. W. (June 23, 2000). Remarks at *Early Childhood Summit*, Washington, DC.

Rimer, S. (October 29, 2003). "Now, Standardized Achievement Testing in Head Start." *The New York Times*, p. A23.

Samuel, J. "What Is People-Centered Advocacy?" www.hrconnection.org/advocacy/people.htm, October 30, 2003.

Documentation to Support Advocacy:
Tips for Teachers to Show How Children Learn through Play

Teachers who can demonstrate the links between play and learning have a compelling base of information on which to build their advocacy for play-based learning in the classroom.

Here are some tips for documenting children's progress in a play-based early childhood educational setting, compiled by teachers Lynn Cohen of Great Neck Public Schools in Great Neck, NY and Sandra Waite-Stupiansky of Edinboro University of Pennsylvania in Edinboro, PA.

■ Be prepared to capture learning in action.
- — Keep writing materials around the room, including in your own pockets.
- — Keep camera loaded with film. (Digital cameras work well, too.)
- — Keep a camcorder loaded with tape and with the battery charged.

■ Take a comprehensive look at play and the learning that happens when kids play.
- — Look at play from all domains (social, emotional, physical, cognitive) and in all areas (blocks, dramatic play, art center, outdoors, book corner, writing center, etc.).
- — Document the teacher's vital roles in play (e.g., facilitator, model, stage manager, etc.).
- — Take notes of play to be expanded upon later.

■ Plan ways to communicate the information you capture.
- — Use clear, non-jargon language when preparing documentation for parents, principals, directors, legislators, etc.
- — Develop a resource file of articles and research to reinforce your documentation of play.

■ Use several media for documenting learning through play.
- — ***Photos***
  - • Develop a system to label photos.
  - • Write down as much detail as possible at the time the photo is taken.
  - • Always get double prints that are no smaller than 4 x 6.
- — ***Videos***
  - • Allow children to become familiar with the camcorder and operator before taping.
  - • Transcribe portions of footage that are difficult to hear.
- — ***Story journals*** (The *flip side* of dramatic play)
  - • Use unlined, 3-hole punched paper for children's illustrations and words.
  - • Record the children's stories exactly as told. Put quotation marks around invented words and incorrect grammar (e.g., He "runned" down the road).
  - • Take the time to act out the children's stories.
- — ***Work samples***
  - • Save all signs and labels children write and draw as they play.
  - • Date each sample and add to child's portfolio.
  - • Take photos of children's constructions, dramatizations, and other artifacts of play.
- — ***Documentation panels***
  - • Involve parents and children in the preparation and display of panels.
  - • Include rationale for children's use of play as a learning tool.
  - • Include quotes from children whenever possible.

Some teachers have been able to create with their children their own web sites, documenting play in their classrooms on an ongoing basis. The information technology consultants in some of the schools have set up workshops to assist teachers with this training.