

“PLAY IS THE WAY,” A TEAM OF EDUCATORS IN IPSWICH, MA, FIND WAYS TO PROMOTE PLAY, EVEN DURING COVID

by Kerry Zarella

All preschool teachers understand that children need to play in order to learn. They know play isn't frivolous, that it is serious work and should not be replaced with stagnant “academic” instruction. Our childcare centers and preschools are under incredible pressure to “prepare” kids for kindergarten. That misguided preparation includes isolated lessons and assessments on the rote learning of letter identification and corresponding sounds, counting, shape naming...the list goes on. Kids are often given improper writing tools and lined paper to practice their letter formations before their small hands and bodies are ready, while the developmentally appropriate arts of free drawing and scribbling are looked down upon. These misunderstandings permeate school, district, and state mandates - mandates that many early childhood educators have to abide by, knowing they are not right. We know that children develop incredible problem-solving skills while playing. We know that when they play, they learn to think, not just echo lists of rote facts.

DEY and other organizations work to educate policymakers and families about the critical need to increase play opportunities and to utilize the power of play as we



teach. We know unstructured, supervised play is critical to the social and emotional wellbeing of children and can be instrumental in teaching academics, as well. Last year, I helped form an alliance of local early childhood educators to promote the use of play in educational settings. This group, *Play is the Way*, was awarded grants in order to collectively and strategically do this work. The *Play is the Way* team engaged

in shared book clubs, professional development opportunities, and monthly meetings to discuss their mission and action plan. They developed a shared mission statement that expresses the need for more play opportunities for young children. Their mission statement reads: **Our mission is to promote the critical importance play has in the life of children. We strive to create programs that utilize the various types of play to support brain development and lay a strong foundation for the social and emotional wellbeing of young children.**

The team worked for a year to develop a community-wide celebration of play, sponsored by The Institution of Savings and Defending the Early Years. They gathered community members and businesses to participate in this celebration. Local organizations and businesses, including Ipswich Museum, Zumis, Henry the Bear, Pomodoris, The Ipswich reCREATion Department, and The Ipswich Public Library were all scheduled to take part in a month-long event starting during the Week of the Young Child in April 2020. A Pop-Up Children’s Museum play space was planned for the Winthrop School Cafeteria and outdoor play space. Due to COVID-19, however, the team had to cancel all community events and begin from scratch. A new team was formed to create an alternative way to celebrate play throughout our community during the pandemic.



One Play is the Way team member, Julie Doyle, the Director of Small Wonders Childcare Center in Ipswich, MA shared, “Although many things have stopped and have been put on hold because of the pandemic, childhood does not and cannot pause. Therefore, our work continues. Play continues to be the foundation of all learning in early childhood and we are committed to finding new ways to support the children and families in our community.” Julie Doyle’s was one of the first centers to re-open and her experience was invaluable to other early childhood educators. Kate Dwyer, Director of the Cuvilly Arts and Earth Center, adds, “When given time for extended uninterrupted play, the connections the children make to each other and the earth are astounding.”

The team members believe that playing is an essential life skill for children and adults. Young children learn best when teacher-guided play is rich with exploratory opportunities and layers of information to uncover. Their mission is to promote the use of play in the education of our youngest students and to inspire adults to rediscover their playful nature through playing with their children. The team developed a COVID-friendly lending library for local preschools that would promote playing opportunities at home for both child and adult. The *By the Playbook* lending library consists of nine educational kits that contain a set of 20 board books, cleaning instructions, thematic play-based lessons that highlight a particular book, and interactive art ideas. The grants also provided the team with

individual play based educational items to be sent home with students following COVID safety protocols.

Young children have the right to play and dream. As teachers we know that playing is serious work. We strive to create programs that build brain power and social skills through carefully crafted learning opportunities. Children must be able to explore their own interests in a supported environment. They need to encounter problems to solve and engage in collaborations with classmates.

The *Play is the Way* team strives to create rich, playful environments that young children need in order to learn and grow. Play is not only fun, but essential to a child's overall development. Our mission is to embrace play in our classrooms while sharing current research with families and policy makers in order to protect children from the academic push down of skills. The team continues to meet monthly and has developed a website that houses all the play based-teacher created lessons, as well as resources for families. Please visit: [Play is the Way....to learn!](#) Thank you DEY for all you do and your support of our work!