

Garden Notes

Early April 2018



“Play is the highest form of research.” - Einstein

San Francisco, with its golden gates and colorful character, recently hosted a conference on the Neuroscience of Innovation and Creativity. Thanks to your generous support toward our professional development, I was able to attend. Three days of lectures by brilliant thinkers, who all seemed to have a doctoral degree in something or another with multiple publications to their credit. By the end of the third day, my brain was on overload. I was exhausted and heavy laden with information. I actually felt worn out, mentally depleted and emotionally dense as I hurried to my final breakout session entitled the *The Neuroscience of Mindfulness and Mindwandering*. I chose a seat close to the front of the room, as I generally do, and powered up my laptop, ready to take diligent notes. Just then one of the hosts announced the class title, “Creativity and Improv” led by Katie McKnight. Huh? Improv? NO! I panicked. I checked her credentials in my conference brochure and she was indeed a well published PhD professor who had also graduated from the Second City Improv Academy in Chicago. The same academy that turned out the likes of Tina Fey, Mike Myers and Martin Short. But, I was definitely in the wrong lecture hall. I scanned the room for an expedient exit. Then it hit me. There was no polite way to get out of there! Filled with dread, I turned toward Dr. McKnight and braced myself for the next ninety minutes. She promptly asked us to put away our computers and lay down our pens and paper. No notes? I began sweating in earnest. Next, we were asked to stand and begin moving our bodies in harmony with the random stranger sitting next to us. I gave my partner an awkward smile and together we attempted to form the letter “S”. In less than a minute we had collapsed toward one another in hysterics. Five minutes later and I was genuinely happy. I’d introduced myself to everyone at the table (something I hadn’t done in any of the previous lectures) and was grinning with eagerness for the next ridiculous assignment. All mental tension had simply vanished along with my physical exhaustion and emotional heaviness. We were PLAYING. All of us. And it was diverting. I was learning and it was fun! LIGHT BULB!

Rewind two weeks, to a conversation in the studio where six children and I were gathered around a table drawing black line self portraits. One child was having a blast and things were getting a bit goofy. Just then, another child said, in a stern voice, “You need to focus. Play is what you do outside. Inside you work and focus.” I was taken aback. I asked what other differences she saw between play and work. The group lit up and a conversation was underway. They were eager to clarify. I’ll summarize the key points: play is fun, but it is something you’re only allowed to do outside or in other designated areas (for instance a playroom or your bedroom or sometimes in other

areas). When you're playing you don't have to focus or do anything else. You're just having fun and you get to make the rules. Contrast this to work which I was told involves: focus, being quiet, listening and doing what you are told. Work rarely falls under the category of fun. I asked if work could ever be play and vice versa? The children gave me that pitying look reserved only for beloved adults woefully deficient in good sense, and answered "No." I reminded them that my work was fun and that I got to play all day. I asked if they had fun in the studio? To which they shouted YES but answered that "art" is not work. Clearly our wires have gotten crossed somewhere along the way.

Children learn through play. It's sort of the rockstar thing about childhood. They remind us, dear adults that we can sometimes be, that life is to be enjoyed and learning can be a blast! In fact, that's how nature programmed us. Our long childhood (twice as long as any other animal) provides ample opportunities for mistake making, experimenting and growth. The longer the childhood, the bigger the brain and smarter the species. So PLAY is arguably the foundation of all intelligence. Psychiatrist Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play, says, "What all play has in common is that it offers a sense of engagement and pleasure, takes the player out of a sense of time and place, and the experience of doing it is more important than the outcome." He suggests that the opposite of play isn't work, but depression. So how are our children getting the message that play and work are mutually exclusive? Perhaps it's a problem with our vernacular. Words help us understand various concepts but our brains aren't great at embracing gradation and paradox. Brains tend to perceive in an either/or fashion rather than along a continuum. We understand dark because we have a concept for light, up because we have a concept for down, work because we have a concept for play, but fundamentally these are concepts not polarities. Maria Montessori (genius that she was) recognized how these concepts can work for or against us. In her day there was a consensus that children could only play and their work and potential was dismissed accordingly. So she sagely flipped the words. Calling the materials in her classrooms *works* and communicating the value of a child's work with scientific rigor. Dr Peter Gray, a psychologist at Brown University, points out that play is always accompanied by the feeling of, "Yes! This is exactly what I want to do now." Montessori's teaching method was designed to meet every child where they are, offering self directed works that naturally give rise to the feeling, YES this IS exactly what I want to be doing right now! Work and Play are synonymous. The same came said for the schools of Reggio-Emilia in Italy. In an age where our cultural push for school readiness is at an all time high, it continues to be our job, as parents, teachers and caregivers, to provide children opportunities for self-chosen and self-directed play/work where adults are not taking control of children's play. This doesn't mean we can't join in the fun and in some cases can even be leaders in children's play, but to do so requires that we exhibit at least the same sensitivity that children themselves show to the needs and desires of *all* the players, keeping in mind that play is an activity in which the *means* are more valued than the *end*.

So as the calendar leans toward spring and summer let's consider how we might reconfigure our concepts of work and play. After all, every form of play involves a good deal of self-control. When not playing, children (and adults too) are free to act according to their own immediate needs, emotions, and whims; but when we play we have to act in ways that we and our playmates deem appropriate to the game. This sounds like a healthy community to me. In a culture that values busyness, hard work and productivity play is often seen as lazy. But it isn't. It's useful. It's necessary. It brightens our mood, shifts our perspective and lights up the brain regions necessary for learning. Life is a playground in which we all get to play/work. So as the long days of our calendar year approach I hope we all remember that no matter where we are or what we are doing, there is always time to *PLAY!*

Stay Curious and Enjoy your Moment.

*Please join the Studio Teachers for a Curator's Talk
and Preview the Art Show!*

Wednesday, May 9th at 10:15 am or 12:25 pm

RSVP

Mark Your Calendar

We are very excited to announce our next
Parent Speaker Night.
Dr. Kate McGoldrick will be speaking on the topic of
Children in the Electronic Age.



Thursday, April 19th at 6:30 pm
Hosted by the Brockman Family

RSVP

"Shake, Rattle & Roll"

Music and Movement to the Tune of Summer
CGMS Summer Camp - July 9th through July 26th
Click below for more details and Registration Forms

Toddler Form

Primary Form

FYI

The first day of the 2018-2019 School Year is Monday, August 27, 2018.

