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Young Children at Play

By **Anne Tobias**, *Lower School Teacher*

Take two steps into a classroom of four- and five-year-olds. Then just lean against the wall...listen...watch.

Over by the windows, two girls are taking wooden blocks from the shelf and setting them down on the floor. They move with purpose, and their block structures quickly begin to fill the space. As they work, they talk: "Let's make big squares for us to go into!" "That's too hard." "Well, how 'bout we make just one?" More work, nudging the end of a block into place, lowering the last long shape carefully, climbing into the large square enclosure. The girls' voices ring out: "We're sailing! To San Francisco! Get books to read along the way."

A few feet away, a table is strewn with scraps of paper. Several children are drawing and snipping with scissors. A boy firmly presses down on a piece of tape, affixing a flat wooden stick to his drawing. Lifting it up he cries, "Who wants a ticket to the volcano?" and walks around the classroom, repeating his message. Soon children are swept into his idea, eager for a ticket, which the boy rushes back to the table to make. In time, business is so good, he teams up with a partner to keep up with demand.

At a broad table near the sink, a child tears a small chunk of clay from a larger mound, then pushes it flat on a clay board. Again and again, she repeats the action until the flattened pieces form a long line that scrolls away from her board to meet a similar clay line made by a friend. Moments later, the children start talking about the Hudson River, as their own clay rivers emerge and connect.

This classroom is full of movement and sound. The vital pace of interchange runs as a current through the air. Children are playing, and through play, children are learning about themselves, each other, and their environment. They are making meaning.

Play offers children space to explore their salient social-emotional ideas—about power, about danger and safety, about caring and being cared for, about the fascinating details and workings of their human and material environment. As part of their study of the New York City subway, a group of children used hollow blocks on the deck to build their own train—a seat for the driver and a place for the conductor to walk, seats for passengers, a caboose to store "freight," and, ever more fabulously, a game room and a special place for traveling cats. Maps aided travel. Rails got broken and fixed. Taxis ferried passengers to the train station. Children played through what they knew, what they wished for, and what they wondered about.

For young children, the world can sometimes be a scary place. Children seek ways to feel safe and powerful, and test their fears. Enacting a thrilling conquest over monsters, children can actively try out their thoughts and feelings in a way that seems real or almost real in the moment but exists with an understood degree of separation

from reality. In the midst of play, a child will sometimes look up and say, “But it’s only pretend,” as if to reassure herself and others. One day, a girl stood at the snow-filled sensory table, using one hand to direct small plastic whales through the chilly mounds and pools. In the other hand, she grasped a “mean” shark and swam him close to the whales, saying “but he can’t come in to where the babies are.” Danger was present, yet safety prevailed.

Through play, children create and control their own versions of the world as they move toward more complex understandings. Deciding to be a family in the dramatic-play area, one child says, “I want to be the mommy!” Brows furrowed, another child says, “But I’m the mommy.” The moment bristles, ideas about family and the force of personal agendas seem to collide, then: “We could both be mommies. Sometimes there are two mommies.” The game moves on, its family firmly in place. But a slight and essential shift has taken place. A child’s need has been accommodated by a friend. An understanding about families has been spoken and accepted. In the context of play, children are growing and learning.

Classrooms in Bank Street’s Lower School are set up to invite play, with teachers firm in the belief that children at play are meaningfully involved in aspects of social, emotional, and cognitive development—a core piece of learning. As children strive to create play themes and then propel the play forward, they actively engage with one another, using language and action to express ideas and feelings related to their own unfolding understanding of themselves in the world as well as discovering and navigating other children’s perspectives. One year, birthday parties were a big theme in the dramatic-play area, with children bringing their experience to bear as they collaborated on this idea. “Let’s pretend it’s your birthday today,” said one child. “Here’s your birthday card!” And the story was off and running, with the busy writing of birthday invitations, travel to the party in a taxi through rain and snow, then arrival at the birthday child’s hollow-block house. “Ding, dong. We’re here! I got the pizza and the cheeses and some fruits too.” Children managed their different preferences for the details of birthday celebrations by taking turns being the birthday child and being in charge of the narrative of the play.

Clearly, though play is an intuitive and primary activity for most typically developing children, it is, at the same time, a complex and challenging activity. For the ongoing demands of collaboration are strong, asking children to arrive at a multitude of mutual agreements and to resolve a multitude of conflicts as they attempt to share space, materials, and ideas. Two girls and one boy have built a “police boat” with hollow blocks in the classroom. While their friend stirs corks in a bowl to make “egg soup” for the hard-working crew, the other children pick up telephones and talk to each other. “Ahoy, captain!” “Is something bad happening?” “There’s oil, and a hole in the bottom of the boat.” This news gets the attention of the cook who rushes to “try to fix it.” She looks with annoyance at her girl friend and says, “You’re only call-

ing me and not your dad.” Which causes the boy to say, “But sometimes you’re going to call me, huh?” Taking on new roles, navigating fast-moving and unpredictable ideas, sharing friends—play means taking risks. Stretching to understand and take care of friends—play means actively practicing empathy.

While children’s voices stand out in play, teachers maintain an important presence. On any given day, at any given time, a teacher might serve as an observer, a mediator, or even an active player, depending on the needs of the children. In all these roles, and more, she is a guide as children take on the complexities of play. Indeed, conflicts that arise during play—centered on issues that matter so deeply to children—are essential experiences that provide space for teaching and learning. What happens when a friend insists on being “the boss of the game”? What happens when the chasing game gets too rough? What happens when your friend decides to play with someone else? Grappling with these conflicts and working toward resolution provide authentic opportunities for children, supported by their teachers, to grow socially and emotionally.

And then there are the many joys. For children still have the power through play to become anything they can imagine and, in playing, know the secret of re-inventing the world.