

# Growing movement to include more creative play in programs

**M**y favourite story about the value of play came from my four-year-old while playing store one sunny summer afternoon.

"Let's count the apples," I said as I held out the purple playdough fruit in front of her. Annie immediately understood my tutorial tone, looked me straight in the eye and said, "Mommy, we're playing store — not school."

Red-faced, I bought my purple fruit and shut up, reminded once again that she didn't need to play school to learn from play. That's when she sorted the apples into three different types and told me in elaborate detail how her imaginary apple farm worked to supply her imaginary apple store. Then — as if to appease me — she counted the fruit and added up my bill with a little grin of victory.

Kids know how to play — they are the experts in the field. If we're lucky we can still dip into the well of imagination, but they drink from it every day. If left alone they will drench themselves in this potion of play that scientists — the other experts — now believe works to build their brains like some kind of magic.

Imaginative play is one of the five areas of importance cited in UBC's Human Early Learning Partnership

(HELP) Early Development Instrument and is touted as one of the best ways to boost your child's emotional maturity. This ongoing large scale research project also suggests that play is one of the most important ways to enhance language and cognitive development. Visit the website at <http://www.help.ubc.ca/atlas/Chapter3>

There is a growing movement to include more creative play in our early childhood development and education programs with young children.

Researchers have come to the realization that children retain information best by experiential learning in which they see a reason to learn those fundamental literacy and numeracy skills. It seems they need some reason to count their apples.

But Annie doesn't care about any of this important scientific validation. She's too busy in her single-minded zeal to imagine, demanding long hours of empty time and accepting nothing less. She could care less that her rather unique view of the world means she's created some interesting brain-building exercises for both of

us over the years.

At three, she asked me to hold out my hand and then delicately placed something on my palm that only she could see. I asked what it was and she looked at me slightly exasperated. "It's Rose," she whispered. "Hold her until I get out of the bathroom." And she ran off.

What was I going to do? I had heard of Rose. Rose who could change her shape and her clothes with lightning speed. Rose who could fly and hide and never much liked human company other than my daughter's.

Rose has been a vital part of my child's development. She helped Annie cope when her sister started school. She took Annie into the woods where my daughter began a love of herbs and flowers that has grown into a botanical obsession. Maybe most importantly, Rose gave Annie a strong, confident voice when she was only beginning to discover her own.

So, I stood there — holding Rose. And was instantly taken back to when I also had such a friend. He had the less-poetic name of Larry and I don't

remember that he could shapeshift — but he was real. So real that I felt as if he may be around the corner at that very moment smiling as I held Rose in my palm.

I was glad my parents had not heeded those early suggestions to take me to a shrink because of my somewhat unconventional friendship with Larry.

And I'm thankful that Rose and Annie have given me so many such opportunities to dip my toes into their well of imagination.

Given me the chance — for the length of a fairy wing anyway — to once again be drenched in the waters of my own imagination. Who knows, maybe it will help me grow back some of those brain cells that seem to be disappearing at a rapid rate these days. In any case, it couldn't hurt to try. I'm off to play.

• The Mission Early Childhood Development Committee's Parent Resource Quarterly lists plenty of opportunities for playful learning such as Family Place programs and drop-ins as does the Mission Parks, Recreation and Culture Leisure Guide. For more information about other early childhood go to <http://www.mission-ecdc.com.shawbiz.ca/Home.html>.

## The Love of Reading



Lynn Easton

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