



Smart Start Update --- December 2013

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The Importance of Play in Early Childhood

by Commissioner Jeana Ross
Department of Children's Affairs

My first connection to early education and care was as a first year student at Auburn University majoring in Early Childhood Education. Prior to this, my only experience with children had been limited babysitting and the idea of child development being a science was very intriguing.



My first observation at the child development center was watching through a two-way mirror and mapping child interactions. This was fascinating to me and it developed into a lifelong interest. The developmental change of each human life with its basic predictability, intertwined with individual uniqueness, abilities and experiences defining the design of the human potential would forever inspire my interest and devotion to children attaining their greatest potential.

Children enter this world laboratory ready to explore, learn and develop. Play is the means children have to actively engage in this process. The free investigation of their surroundings provides opportunities for trial, error and success.

In the most effective pre-K settings, play is supported in a climate that is developmentally appropriate through active learning. Active learning defined by High Scope Educational Research Foundation is "the direct and immediate experiencing of objects, people, ideas and events and is a necessary condition for cognitive restructuring and thus for development." According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, "What we learn about specific children helps us teach and care for each child as an individual. By continually observing children's play and interaction with the physical environment and others, we learn about each child's interests, abilities, and developmental progress."

It is also critical to have spontaneous free play during the center day and in times outside the center/school day. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, some play must remain entirely child driven with parents or other adults not present or as passive observers in order to build some of the individual assets children need to develop and remain resilient. In *Pediatrics*, (Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Ginsburg, 2007) the following strategies are offered for pediatricians to promote:

Zero to Five Matters

~A newsletter focused on our most valuable investment~

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Don't Forget to follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). The APC launched a social media campaign in November that targets parents, early childhood professionals, business leaders and our partners in the state. 'A Tweet a Day for Learning and Play' provides early education tips and research, including information on our initiatives and partners. Check it out today!

December FOCUS
Check out this month's Smart Start FOCUS [Packet](#) on play!

Mark Your Calendars:

Economic Impact of the Early Care and Education Industry Press Conference
December 16th at 2 pm
AUM

[SECA Conference](#)
January 16-18, 2014
Williamsburg, VA

- Supporting free play as a healthy, essential part of childhood. Recommend that all children are afforded ample, unscheduled, independent, non-screen time to be creative, to reflect, and to decompress.
- Emphasizing that, although parents can certainly monitor play for safety, a large proportion of play should be child driven rather than adult directed.
- Educating families regarding the protective assets and increase resiliency developed through free play and some unscheduled time.
- Discussing with parents that, although very well intentioned, arranging the finest opportunities for their children may not be parents' best opportunity for influence and that shuttling their children between numerous activities may not be the best quality time.
- Reminding parents that the most valuable and useful character traits that will prepare their children for success arise not from extracurricular or academic commitments but from a firm grounding in parental love, role modeling, and guidance.
- Advocating for safe spaces in under-resourced neighborhoods, perhaps by opening school, library, or community facilities to be used by children and their parents after school hours and on weekends.

As we in good faith efforts "leave no children behind" and "race to the top" let's think back to the days of our early childhood running through yards and down streets free to explore, test boundaries and resolve conflicts with one potato, two potato. It was in those times of play, the most important lessons were learned with delight and exuberance, free of anxiety and depression. We learned to emotionally connect with others while pretending "you're the mommy and I'm the daddy", to creatively solve problems constructing forts collaboratively (even with the mean boy next door) and to develop more complex cognitive skills by sorting and counting rocks for a collection. In the ever increasing stressful, pressured and competitive world we live, it is vitally important to understand and protect the simple child driven joy of play.

Would you like a piece of my mud pie?

Child Care: Keeps Alabama Working

The Alabama Partnership for Children is excited to announce that it will be releasing the results of a new economic impact study on December 16, 2013. The study, *Economic Impact of the Early Care and Education Industry on the Economy of the State of Alabama*, was authored by Dr. Keivan Deravi, Professor of Economics at Auburn University at Montgomery. The findings demonstrate that the early care and education industry is critical to the vitality of Alabama's economy.

A press conference will be held at Auburn University at Montgomery on December 16th at 2 pm and highlights from the study will be shared. The APC will send out a special announcement following the press conference to introduce the study and share the exciting findings.

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We would like to thank:

The Women's Fund of Greater Birmingham for their continued support of the T.E.A.C.H. Project through a \$25,000 grant awarded for 2014. The funding will allow the APC to support job training and access to higher education for a minimum of 10 women working in Blount, Jefferson, Shelby, St. Clair and Walker counties.

The Alabama Partnership for Children would also like to thank **PNC Bank**. The APC was awarded a PNC Foundation grant in support of our Strengthening Families initiative in the amount of \$16,851. The funding will support our Books, Balls and Blocks events and Community Cafes in Jefferson, Madison, Morgan and Talladega counties.

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Alabama Partnership for Children: Strengthening Families in Alabama

Alabama is one of many states across the nation using Strengthening Families™ (SF). Leaders across many systems serving children and families have provided leadership to bring SF to life in Alabama. In 2011, the Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention, the state Children's Trust Fund (CTF) provided a grant to the Alabama Partnership for Children to take over the role as lead agency for this work.

Our goal is to fully engage early childhood providers as well as other service providers across Alabama, as well as other service organizations, while impacting parents through our Strengthening Families™ efforts. This work is accomplished in partnership with the Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers.

What is Strengthening Families?

Strengthening Families™ is a research-based, cost-effective strategy to increase family stability, enhance child development and reduce child abuse and neglect. It builds five protective factors:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Social and emotional competence of children

Alabama Partnership for Children Strengthening Families™ Activities:

Books, Balls, and Blocks is a free event held for children and their families. Offered in partnership with the Help Me Grow initiative, the purpose of the event is to screen children for developmental delays in the first 5 years of life. The event is fun, educational, and exciting! While children engage in games and activities



at different stations, parents learn how these interactions help stimulate their child's development. Also, while the children are playing, parents can complete the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3). The ASQ-3 is reliable, cost-effective, and easy to use. On site, there are professionals to score the ASQ-3. Afterwards, parents receive follow-up from the professional to learn if their child's development 1) appears on schedule, 2) needs to be monitored and provided learning activities, or 3) requires further assessment with a professional. Parents are given resources concerning their child's development and fun activities that they can do with their child. There is follow-up to help parents get the resources they may need.



Community Cafes are an easy-to-use method for having thoughtful and productive discussions around issues that deeply impact our lives, communities and families. Each Community Cafe is a series of guided conversations based on the

Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework™ leadership development and parent partnership. These conversations are typically hosted by parent leaders and aim to increase community wisdom, build parent voices and facilitate action to improve lives for children. They are built on the belief that people already have within them the wisdom to address even the most difficult challenges. The Alabama Partnership for Children uses this model in creating strong partnerships with parents and communities. This approach is being practiced in neighborhoods, early learning and child care settings, schools, faith-based organizations, and social service systems.

Our Mission: To work in partnership with other public and private entities to maintain an effective state and local system of resources and support that enables parents, families, and others who care for young children to ensure that they are healthy, protected, nurtured, and offered every opportunity to succeed in life.

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