



From birth to age 5, preschoolers are hard at work, decoding the world around them, learning to control their bodies, and expressing themselves through language and action. It's no wonder they need a nap sometimes.

In an increasingly indoor world, early childhood learning is often construed as academic preparation, frequently delivered by digital technologies. But both local and national research has demonstrated that while they're working at play, young learners are using their senses as tools. Play strengthens neural development and even helps children withstand chronic stress.

"Play is more than physical movement," says Cara Ciminillo, operations manager of the Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children, or PAEYC. "Play is how they learn social and emotional skills. It builds resilience to poverty conditions and family challenges, like adults who come and go or like moving from space to space."

PLAYLEARNING

"PLAY IS OFTEN TALKED ABOUT AS IF IT WERE A RELIEF FROM SERIOUS LEARNING.
BUT FOR CHILDREN PLAY IS SERIOUS LEARNING. PLAY IS REALLY THE WORK OF CHILDHOOD." —FRED ROGERS



At Shady Lane preschool in Pittsburgh's East End, children develop an appreciation for living, learning and playing in relationship with others. The school's Partners classroom for those ages 3 to 5 offers "Discover Time" that invites children to explore art, construction, science, drama and sensory experiences. Using toys as their tools, children work together to measure their height with blocks, below left, and to investigate light and structure with colorful magnetic shapes, left.

Such findings about children's light-hearted movement has led several recent initiatives to celebrate play—and to allow parents and caregivers to learn why balls, blocks and books are as important as touch screens. From the Day-Glo Lozziwurm sprawling outside the Carnegie Museum of Art to community-designed playgrounds to a variety of innovative library programs, Pittsburgh adults are making more room for child's play. The efforts have coalesced into the Playful Pittsburgh Collaborative, a two-year-old partnership among institutions with places or ideas for play. Participants include museums, government agencies and the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, with support from foundations like the Grable and Eden Hall foundations and The Heinz Endowments.

"Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imaginations, dexterity and physical, cognitive and emotional strength," says Marge Petruska, the Endowments' senior program director for Children, Youth & Families. "Unfortunately, far too many children in Pittsburgh's underserved communities lack great play spaces that are safe and within walking distance."

The Endowments awarded an \$800,000, multi-year grant to the national nonprofit playground-builder KaBOOM! to help address this need by collaborating with local residents in constructing at least 10 new play spaces in targeted neighborhoods. Ms. Petruska adds that the effort promotes children's health and physical fitness, helping reduce childhood obesity. "We are excited to watch the neighborhood volunteers come together to construct all components of the playground and complete overall beautification of the play spaces in six hours," she says.

Yet, college admissions competitions and programs aimed at closing STEM gaps—science, technology and math—have indicated that Americans' education anxieties extend into preschool, where some suggest that children without continuous formal instruction are simply wasting time. Families now view kindergarten as a first academic hurdle, rather than a gentle introduction to school, says Michelle Figlar, who recently stepped down as PAEYC's executive director to serve as deputy secretary of the state Office of Child Development and Early Learning in Pennsylvania.

"Kindergarten is extremely different from 20 years ago. Many children are reading by the end of the year," she points out. "Back then, the goal was to help children socialize. Now, their first

separation from parents comes much earlier. Children must learn those school readiness skills earlier: to take turns, to use language to solve problems, to persevere."

Those skills start with play. Repetition of games and songs builds an infant's neural pathways. Given a ball, a baby will learn motor skills to roll it, drop it in a box and take it out again. Blocks help toddlers build cognitive skills like creativity, logic and counting. By reading aloud from picture books, parents stimulate a child's language skills—a key factor later in life. Barbara Gebhard, assistant director of policy at ZERO TO THREE, a national nonprofit, notes that the more words a child has heard by age 3, the more likely he or she is to master reading in third grade—and to complete high school on time.

PAEYC staffs early learning hubs in two Pittsburgh neighborhoods, Homewood and Hazelwood. The centers provide supports for families, help with parenting skills, and answer questions about children's development. Each Tuesday, the Homewood center offers play learning professional development for home-based child care providers; every other Saturday, families are invited for drop-in "Come Play" dates.

Becky Mercatoris, PAEYC's early learning network director, says the sessions are unstructured. "People are getting used to enjoying the materials with their children. Come Play is about having the child direct the activities and having the parents feel comfortable extending that learning. I see a change in how parents are talking with children—asking, 'What if we moved the dinosaurs into the block area?' They're guiding play."

In a region where young children are a distinct minority—children under the age of 5 represent only 5 percent of the Allegheny County's 1.2 million residents—engaging adults is a key strategy for the Playful Pittsburgh Collaborative. In addition to its advocacy work, the collaborative focuses on creating events and spaces where all ages are welcome. In April, Playful Pittsburgh celebrated its third annual Ultimate Play Day, an event at a Hazelwood park that was open to the entire community.

"Parents are the gatekeepers of play," says Ms. Ciminillo. "If parents think a place isn't safe, or that there's nothing there for adults, they won't go there. They must feel comfortable."

She adds that the broad definition of play makes it "a great concept to have everyone wrap their arms around... We want to engage them all to step out the door and be part of something fun." *h*