



Pursuing a new vision of early childhood education and care

Improving the Quality of Children's Play

What factors determine the quality?



Photo : Koganei Kindergarten attached to Tokyo Gakugei University (Keisuke Nakano)

Yoichi Sakakihara

Director, CRN, M.D., Ph.D.,
Professor, Graduate School of
Ochanomizu University.
Specializes in pediatric neurology
and developmental disorders.



Recent studies in developmental psychology show that children learn through spontaneous play. The 3rd ECEC Research Conference featured a lecture by a leading researcher and a workshop for teachers, followed by open discussions where they exchanged views on child care that improves the quality of children's play. What factors determine the quality of children's play? This report introduces the discussion.

Researchers and teachers discuss current and future issues of early childhood education and care.

Child Research Net (CRN) hosted the 3rd ECEC Research Conference on child care that improves the quality of play. This report focuses on the workshop for teachers, the discussion among teachers and researchers, and the lecture by a leading researcher.



Workshop for teachers

Teachers from public and private kindergartens and day-care centers discussed how to achieve learning through play. Participants first divided into groups according to either day-care or kindergarten affiliation and later joined a combined sum-up session. In this way, they identified issues unique to each group as well as common issues and exchanged opinions to seek solutions.

Achieving learning through play (excerpt)

Common issue	● Decline in capacity of young teachers to understand children's play activities. Increase in teachers with little play experience in childhood.
Main issues of kindergartens	● Does the kindergarten value play? ● Do children have enough time to play as events increase throughout the year?
Main issues of day-care centers	● Lack of time to exchange information on children and play due to long working hours. ● Due to limited space, play is interrupted by meals or naps, making continuity in play difficult.

Discussion among Researchers and Teachers

Eight teachers and five researchers discussed the quality of children's play and how to improve it. Analyzing the status of child care from different angles, including teacher training to promote high-quality play, the ability of directors required to enhance play-based learning, and how to cooperate with guardians and local communities, they discussed methods to improve play-based child care. The discussion produced many helpful suggestions and solutions, providing ideas on how to develop childcare through play and inform the public of its significance.

For further information, please visit <http://www.childresearch.net/events/ecec/>

Lecture

Takako Kawabe

Professor, University of the Sacred Heart.
Previously worked at public kindergartens in Tokyo.



Play is critical for child development

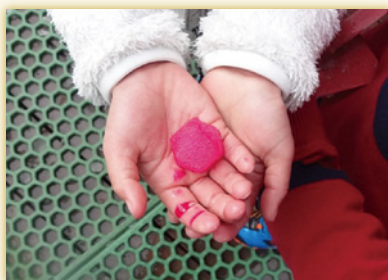
Ample play is crucial for child development. Nonetheless, children do not play with clear objectives from the beginning. They simply start playing and think of ways to make play more fun. Playing is the very act of “learning” as it creates “order” from “chaos.” The more children play, the more they develop as active learners, and this establishes the essential foundation for future development.

Fun play motivates children. The process of incorporating novelty into play to make it more fun and exciting is important in developing independence, but this is difficult to achieve without the help of teachers. I hope all teachers will become aware of the fact that play is critical for early childhood education and care and that high-quality play contributes to child development.

Observe to identify opportunities to assist play

To help you think about how teachers can assist children’s play, I will introduce an example of a private kindergarten in Kanagawa Prefecture.

On a heavily snowing day, I visited the kindergarten and saw many children playing in the snow on the playground. One child pointed to snow piled on the doormat at the entrance and exclaimed, “It looks like a macaroon!” All the children then started to make macaroons with snow. Another child said “Let’s open a macaroon shop!” and the teacher who had been observing the group suggested using watercolors. Once they started coloring, they were all absorbed in their play enjoying different colors of macaroons. In this way, their play developed with the teacher’s assistance (see photo at right).



Other teachers helped children make a snow hut or play on a sled. To achieve the objective of their play, they used language to promote a clearer idea of what to do and provide technical help.

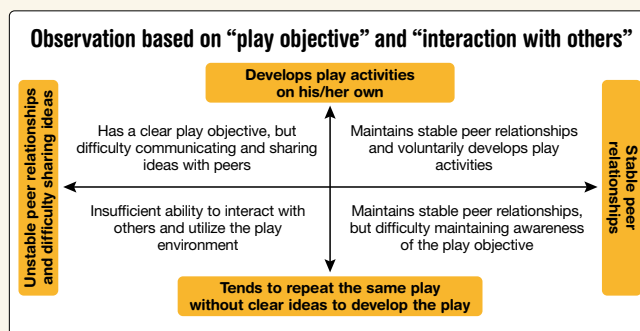
Other fun activities on that day included making a castle with snow and snowball fights. I believe this is a good example of how the teachers’ assistance improves the quality of play.

Assistance method: Grasp the broad picture and observe closely

How should teachers assist children? Without question, they first need to understand children well. This explanation is based on my experience as a kindergarten teacher. Helping children appropriately in play requires both a typological understanding of children as well as getting to know each child individually. Setting up “objective of play” and “behavior in play” as two axes, both of which are important to enrich children’s play, I classified children’s play into four types based on the above two factors (see the chart below). This rough classification is followed by close observation of five factors to determine specific ways to assist children:

(1) ability to develop a sense of purpose and accomplish what is desired; (2) ability to recompose their play (can the child recompose continuously his/her play to have more fun); (3) ability to understand play environments (things and places to play) and actively utilize them; (4) ability to gather information from other’s behavior and make decisions; and (5) ability to communicate ideas and thoughts with others.

The method of “grasping the broad picture and observing closely” is applied to assist each child depending on the particular situation, i.e., actively helping when children showed difficulty with stable peer relationships and observing when children were easily absorbed in play with peers. It encourages high-quality play suited for each individual child.



Developed by CRN based on slide materials prepared by Professor Kawabe.

What is ECEC?

ECEC stands for Early Childhood Education and Care. Recognizing ECEC as a key concept for a new mode of early childhood education and care, Child Research Net (CRN) is launching ECEC studies.

Note: ECEC is also referred by other terms such as ECCE and ECD.

Editorial postscript



Past research conferences on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) have focused on “The Challenges and Prospects of ECEC in Japan” and “Playful Pedagogy: Learning through Play.” Our most recent conference addressed the “Quality of Play.” I was very moved by Professor Kawabe’s speech that stressed the importance of teacher assistance in enriching the quality of play. I really respect the efforts of teachers. (Aiping Liu)



I realized how important the quality of play is and how it depends on the way teachers and other adults get involved. I hope that we, as adults, will take our responsibility seriously as we become involved in children’s activities and have fun with them. (Junko Ogawa)

CRN Profile

Director: Yoichi Sakakihara (Professor, Graduate School, Ochanomizu University)

Honorary Director: Noboru Kobayashi (Professor Emeritus, University of Tokyo; President Emeritus, National Children’s Hospital)

Special Advisor: Takemochi Ishii (Professor Emeritus, University of Tokyo)

Coordinators: Aiping Liu, Junko Ogawa (BERD)

Location: c/o Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute (BERD), 1-34, Ochiai, Tama-shi, Tokyo 206-0033, Japan

Child Research Net is an international and interdisciplinary internet-based child research institute, operated with the support of Benesse Holdings, Inc.

Benesse®

<http://www.childresearch.net/>



ECEC04-EN

Issued date: May 31, 2014