Play Day

Understanding Play

Play is how children learn about the world. Children are constantly learning through play, and at every age children will play in ways that challenge and teach—developing motor skills, creating intellectual concepts, and feeding an expanding joy and curiosity about everything.

Unfortunately, many parents don't understand that children are working as hard as they can at very important tasks. Adults mistakenly have learned that play is trivial and work is important. Along with this assumption comes condemnation of many of the aspects of play—noise, process-orientation, repetition, and changing activities at will. Parents assume educational activities must be like the school activities they remember—quiet, product-oriented, linear, and controlled by time periods.

The result is that well-meaning parents try to provide educational toys and experiences for children who aren't ready for those activities—and who would do fairly well preparing themselves for those learning experiences if they were allowed to play. This unfortunate clashing of children's needs with parents' expectations can frustrate an entire family.

Play Day

A play day addresses this unfortunate clash by offering play activities for children and helping parents understand why and how children play. It encourages the family to enjoy play together and helps parents learn about activities and environments that provide rewarding play.

Organizing

A play day requires play experts and heavy-duty play equipment. In other words, a club should work with early childhood educators from preschools, child-care centers, and Head Start programs. Supplement this core group with some parents, a psychologist, and a pediatrician or pediatric nurse.

Encourage the group to plan activities, assign coaches and supervisors to each activity area, and contribute equipment. Plan discussion times during which parents can learn about the needs of children in specific developmental stages.

Establish the club's function as logistical support. Club members can help publicize the event, transport and set up equipment, act as safety monitors, provide refreshments, and clean up.

A play day can be staged at any time during the year, but two particularly good occasions are the Week of the Young Child, sponsored by the US National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) each April, and Kiwanis Kids' Day, the fourth Saturday in September.

Activities

Activities for play day depend on season and location. Outdoor settings are conducive to large muscle activities, exploration, and more involvement with water, sand, dirt, plants, and animals. Indoor settings allow block play, puzzle play, and more controlled activities. Circle songs, dress-up and imaginative dramas, art and crafts, and many other activities work indoors or out.

No matter what the setting, activities should meet the needs of every stage of development from infancy through age five. Parents should leave the event...
knowing specific activities that their children currently enjoy. As the play day takes shape, the planners can create a list of ages (birth to four months, four to eight months, eight to 12 months, 12 to 18 months, and years two, three, four, and five), noting the specific activities available for each age group and the play leaders or advisers for this group. This ensures attention is given to each group. A second checklist—or a cross list for a matrix—will ensure variety in the play activities. Try to provide different kinds of play activities:

- Large muscle or motor
- Construction
- Creative and craft
- Drama or make-believe
- Manipulative
- Games and songs
- Water and sand
- Quiet

Activity areas and age groups should be separated by boundaries that direct children toward appropriate play.

Special activities for parents can educate them about toy making at home (such as making building blocks out of milk cartons), safety during play (dangers on playgrounds), and health concerns (coping with cuts and bumps).

**Themed Play Days**

An interesting variation on a play day is a messy fun day. It provides young children with an opportunity to do all the things their parents don't want them to do at home. Parents bring their children in their oldest clothes and let them play in mud, finger paint, and body paint; put on make-up; build dams in a creek; participate in a cake-eating contest; and enjoy whatever other messy activities the sponsors create. Then, all the kids rinse off in sprinklers and hoses.

Other variations could introduce children to farm animals and pets, explore nature, focus on winter activities, or encourage dressing up in costumes for the entire event.

**Setting**

A neighborhood play day may work well at a child-care center, preschool, or church. This puts the event where most of the equipment is. A community event may require a larger setting, such as a park or a school. If businesses provide financial sponsorship, they may push to stage the event in their parking lot or a blocked-off street.

If a proposed setting is outdoors, the club should ensure availability of drinking water, rest rooms, shady areas, and tables and chairs. Additional faucets, convenient parking, and a playground are helpful.

**Sponsorship**

The costs for a play day should be minimal. Equipment can be loaned by child-care providers and toy stores (with a follow-up sale on pre-tested toys). Some toys can be created by volunteers, such as:

- Blocks made from milk cartons
- Bubble makers made from coat hangers
- Volcanoes made from two-liter soft-drink bottles, vinegar, and baking soda
- Drums made from coffee cans, paper or cloth, and tape
- Paper boats and hats

Refreshments are optional, but a restaurant or food store probably can be persuaded to donate soft drinks, ice, and paper cups. If food is served, it should appeal to young children and not present choking hazards.

**Publicity**

A flier about play day can go home with all the children in child-care programs and preschools. It can be posted in churches, food stores, pharmacies, toy stores, children’s clothing stores, and offices of pediatricians.

Ask the local newspaper to become a sponsor of the event by running a free advertisement about play day. Offer the same opportunity to a radio station.

Encourage the newspaper to send a photographer to the play day—cute pictures of kids are likely to make the next edition. Be sure the Kiwanis logo is prominently displayed.

**Evaluation**

Work with the play day committee to create a short evaluation form that parents can complete before they leave. This will tell the group what parts of the play day were most successful and what needs to be changed for the following year.

**Information**

The NAEYC can provide a wide range of books, brochures, and videotapes about child play, supervision, safety, and activity ideas.
Membership Potential

In every service project your club develops, watch for opportunities to recruit new members.

- As you develop partnerships and coalitions with other organizations, invite representatives to your meetings and urge them to join your club.
- As you seek additional resources from companies to support a project, invite representatives to a meeting for the club to formally thank them. Then, follow-up with an invitation to join.
- When club members bring spouses or friends to assist at events, ask if they’ve considered joining the club.
- When people talk to you during service projects, invite them to come to a club meeting.
- When you send news releases about your projects to local papers and radio stations, be sure to include the club’s meeting time and location.

Remember that everyone who helps you with a project or tells you it’s a good idea is a potential member for your club. Point out that they would have many more opportunities to serve the community and to influence the direction of club service projects if they became members. And, tell them how rewarding you find the club.

Sample Flier

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**Play Day**

Learn what your children know! Play isn’t just fun, it’s educational!

Bring your children ages five and under to:

- Learn why children play
- Discover the way your children think
- Find out how you can help them learn and . . .
- Have fun playing

10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Saturday, April 23
Tiny Tots Preschool and Lincoln Park
1923 Lincoln Drive

- Free Brochures
- Free Refreshments
- Free Fun!

*Sponsored by the Bedford Journal, Radio Station WCCB, Bedford Child Care Association, Ohio Association for Education of Young Children, and the Kiwanis Club of Bedford*
### Sample Evaluation Form

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What did you like most about the play day?  ______________________________________
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What should be changed in future play days?  ______________________________________
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