The emergence of professional play specialists

Quick! What’s the opposite of “play”? Most of us — including children — do not need to spend much time thinking about the answer to that question. We don’t need to grab a thesaurus or race to our favorite web site or consult with

anyone to figure it out. We get the picture starting when we are very young: work is the opposite of play. Given the choice, we would much rather play than work.

It may seem curious, then, that these two words are being put together in a new “profession” that is emerging in some parts of the world. “Playworkers,” so far found mostly in Europe, Australia, Canada, and some Asian and South American countries, are trained facilitators of children’s play in settings like “parks and playgrounds, afterschool children’s centers, children’s museums, children’s hospitals, toy libraries, family entertainment centers, play gardens, zoos, centers for children with special needs, and many others,” according to the American Association for the Child’s Right to Play (www.ipausa.org).

Growing the ranks of these play professionals, along with setting standards for play, formalizing training and credentialing programs, and advocating for more playworkers in recreational areas funded by municipal governments were frequent topics of discussion at last summer’s well-regarded International Play Association conference in Berlin, Germany (July 2005). Less prominent among the highly informative presentations made by play researchers, playground builders, practitioners, and advocates from all over the world was concern about the role of parents in a child’s access to good play.

Embracing professionals while encouraging parents

As an early childhood educator, perhaps the idea of professionalizing play gives you pause. On the one hand, we know about the powerful link between play and learning, so of course we want high quality play experiences for young children. Trained professionals can be a key resource in delivering such experiences. On the other hand, we hope that happy and healthy play is a part of each family’s lifestyle — encouraged by parents who embrace the idea of a playful home — and we don’t want parents to become inhibited about their play instincts because they don’t have the status of a professional play facilitator.

While we heartily applaud efforts to increase the cadre of well-trained and even credentialed play specialists, at Playing for Keeps we also want to ensure that parents’ involvement in play is supported and valued. One type of “parent influencer” who is uniquely positioned to ensure that parents don’t lose confidence in their own play, using
their own ideas, with their own kids, is you — the early childhood educator.

Parallels with the transformation of teachers into specialists

Lest we minimize the potential risk of parents being professionalized out of their own children’s play, think about the history of American schools and teachers. Our nineteenth century educational system looked for qualities in teachers that were similar to those believed to be present in a good mother: high morality, dependable social conformity, strong nurturing and parental impulses, and lack of distraction from “worldly forces” (Spring, 2001, p. 138).

Early teacher training largely systematized what were considered to be standard norms and objectives in the classroom (e.g., basic functional skills and the development of moral character), which kept teacher expertise closely aligned with parental expertise. It wasn’t until the mid-1800s that theories of learning were developed that eventually required teachers to have highly specialized expertise that was decidedly different from parental expertise. “One of the major intellectual revolutions that accompanied the development of teacher training was the idea that people could be taught how to teach,” notes Joel Spring, professor of Education at the City University of New York (Spring, 2001, p. 145).

During the twentieth century, this lead to new, more modern objectives for education; the requirements of significant higher education and credentials for teachers; and the expectation that parents would defer to professional teachers on matters relating to their children’s education. More recently, this trend has moved down the age range into expectations of highly trained professionals in preschools and, in some states, child care centers.

Why parents need to be confident about their role in play

What is different about play, one could argue — and why we should avoid letting parents lose confidence in their own role — is that play is a natural activity in which kids and parents will engage pretty much by instinct. For parents, the fun and natural aspects of play can serve to:

- Keep them involved and physically present with their children during non-school or non-work hours, rather than opt to turn on the television or put children in yet more lessons or activities
- Help them know their children’s personalities, stresses, preferences, and more
- Reinforce their confidence about their own parenting thanks to the relationship building that results from healthy play
- Provide a way to contribute to their child’s learning, even if the parent does not have the skills, confidence, or time to play an active role in helping with homework or participate with school or child care center events

Your unique role in building parents’ confidence

In your child care setting or preschool, you are a valued source of information about parenting, and about specific ideas to encourage the healthy development of specific children. So what can you do to “inoculate” parents against ceding the territory of play to professionals?

As early care and education professionals, we have a wide repertoire of things to do with children, based on our knowledge about how to set up the early childhood learning environment, how to facilitate play, and when to step back and let children manage a play situation on their own. Most parents do not have this level of training or experience. Moreover, they face many demands every day, and when they come home from work, their day is rarely finished. As if a day of handling on-the-job stresses is not enough, coming home means facing dinner, laundry, chores, bills, and sometimes tired or crabby kids. Creating a playful evening and home environment may not be their top priority — and indeed, it may appear attractive to let play be the bailiwick of professionals.

You can help by keeping it simple, offering ideas that solve problems and can realistically be implemented, constantly reinforcing the fun and positive role of play, and reminding parents they are good at it — naturally. For example:

Proclaim the message early and often. Throughout the year, reinforce the idea that there is no substitute for parent involvement in play, and that good play generally comes naturally to kids and families. You can include this message in open houses, newsletters, on your web site, in parent conferences, at pick-up and delivery time, on parent bulletin boards, and more.

Be realistic. Respond to the real-life issues parents face. Let parents know you understand the stresses they face (which no doubt you do if you are a parent, too!). Create some parent time for reflection about how to use family play as a positive, stress-relieving antidote to a busy day. Why not host a workshop titled: “Coming Home Exhausted!” or “After Five, Then What?” to let a group of parents think of ways to promote family-centered and self-initiated play at home?
Help them remember what childhood fun was like. Most parents can retrieve memories of their own play as young children. This is a rich source that can be transformed into expanding a parent’s repertoire about play, and children love to hear about their parents’ favorite activities and toys. Encourage them to remember and use their memories to bring simple play ideas into their home today. Was it hide-and-seek? Riding in the wagon down an incline? Building with sticks and stones in the backyard? Looking out the window, and watching the birds, the cars, and the people passing by? Remind parents that play does not need to be complicated or use fancy toys or kits to be fun and rewarding.

Let them take ready-to-go play materials home. Some child care centers and public libraries have introduced toy lending libraries. (For information about toy libraries around the country, check out the U.S.A. Toy Library Association at http://usatla.deltacollege.org/.) In your own school or center, it’s easy to keep it simple. Engage a parent volunteer to set up a Learning Pantry where children can take home — to keep — collage kits in brown paper bags filled with paper, popsicle sticks, recycled materials from factories, and some cut outs from magazines. Add sign-out games, book, and CDs that families can borrow for one or several days. Establishing such a center can be an effective focus for a parent fundraising project.

Remind parents about the basics. Kids like to be with mom and dad. Find a job to let them help with making dinner. Let them pull out pots and pans to keep themselves occupied while you cook — no need for fancy toys. Let parents know that the plain cardboard box was just added to the National Toy Hall of Fame, a place where classic toys most beloved to children are honored and memorialized.

Let them know they are doing just fine. Central to a parent’s confidence is an understanding that they are getting it right — whatever “right” means for their child and family. You probably have more influence than you know on the way parents feel about their parenting. Be generous with positive feedback and supportive of their efforts to be a playful family.

Play need not be work for moms and dads, but it should be a family priority that they enjoy and about which they feel just great when they have devoted time and energy to it. There is an important role for dedicated professional play specialists, and the children in your care will no doubt learn much from them during their childhood. But they need their parents as well. You can help the family develop the confidence and skills to make sure that, at home, play and work are opposites in most family activities.

References

From the American Association for the Child’s Right to Play website, November 15, 2005; www.ipausa.org/playwork.htm