



Education



R.I. Children's Museum tries to encourage open-ended play

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As the director of the Children's Museum since 1985, Janice O'Donnell has spent a lot of time watching how kids and adults play with each other and with the museum's stuff. She routinely cruises into the water-play room, past the spaceship, checking on the fun-house mirrors to make sure they're doing what they're supposed to — invite kids into exciting, adventuresome play.

But several years ago she and her staff started noticing a change. The adults don't know how to play. She says, "So the kids are playing with Water Ways, having an awesome time building mazes and redirecting the water, but the parent is bored and wants to move on. No! Leave them alone. Follow their lead. If you don't want to play, bring a book. But we're realizing that parents mainly interact with their kids by directing them, telling them what to do and how to do it. That's because both adults and kids are used to structured activities— school, sports, Suzuki — that lead to one right answer. They no longer value open-ended, free-for-all play."

Megan Fischer, now the museum's marketing manager, adds that when she worked in an afterschool program, she'd lay out a smorgasbord of cool stuff to do, like recycled materials for making collages. "Every single time the kids would say 'Tell me how.' They wanted to know how, exactly, they were supposed to accomplish the activity because they're so used to there being only one answer, a certain result. They wanted to know what it was supposed to look like and how to do it."

O'Donnell adds, "I can't tell you how many college professors have talked about their students wanting to be told what to do." Fischer sighs, "And it gets worse every year."

More and more, we live in a world dominated by right answers, test scores, quantifiable outcomes. "Play" activities need to be aimed at getting my kid into Yale, or at the very least at helping her gain a competitive edge so she'll be a winner.

Actually, evidence shows that real leaders and winners are creative, out-of-the-box problem-solvers, long on persistence and confidence in their ability to interact — with other people and with tangible things like hammers, wire, paints, and plants.

Creative, inventive people play.

Joan Almon, the national executive director of the Alliance for Childhood, elaborates. "I think we've started to fear creativity. We've gotten ourselves in such a box of wanting only what's reasonable, quantifiable, measurable. Creativity doesn't know where it's going to take us. Somewhat by accident, we've driven creativity out of ourselves as adults, so now we're uncomfortable with it in our kids."

So, several years back, O'Donnell and her staff began work on an environment called Play Power. She says, "the museum has always used play as a way to learn, but in a hands-on, let-them-mess-around way. Now we're making our play message more explicit." They began by trying to dice out what they meant by play, capturing their thoughts on big sheets of butcher paper tacked on a conference room's walls.

They concluded, for one thing, that real play is open-ended, with no right answers. Video games have lots of paths and choices, but come to one winning end. Much of the bazillion-dollar toy industry is tied to movies, so the doll, robot or accessory fits into a prefabricated story. TV and coloring books amuse with predetermined paths.

One of the Play Power environments has metal strips loosely shaped into a big dome nestled into a corner where it makes an interior space for two or three kids, with a ladder to a little loft. So it's a house, a fort, a spaceship. O'Donnell had to think twice when a boy told her his favorite place in the museum was the beehive. While watching their kids play in this globe, parents say right out loud, "oh yeah, forts." They'd forgotten about the forts they had when they were young, if only those made with chairs and a blanket.

Play Power explicitly teaches about open-ended play. A sign says "What do you think will happen?" The sign cues the adults as well as kids. O'Donnell says, "The sub-cue is that playing is about making guesses and finding out." A different sign says, "Can you find another way to do it?" Sub-cue: There are no right answers. Playing is experimenting to see what materials can do.

And real play has no extrinsic goals, no rewards. O'Donnell says, "Winning at checkers is about playing more checkers. It's not about playing to gain mastery to get into Harvard. You might want to get good at it, for its own sake, but NOT to get into Harvard. Today's children perform much less well than those 30 years ago on tests for patience, delayed gratification and physical skills. They used to have more free play, socialization and hands-on experience of the world." And, she adds emphatically, "There's nothing in the world wrong with just playing for its own sake."

O'Donnell concedes that much of children's play is boring to adults. Fine. But leave them alone. Encourage them by watching what they do. "Kids' play is so cool." And consider infusing more open-ended play into your own adult life.

To help adults and families play, a Rhode Island group started a Web site — kidoinfo.com — chock full of fun, creative, sometimes nature-oriented stuff to do all over the state, and indoor activities for rainy days. Updated regularly, [kidoinfo](http://kidoinfo.com) is growing quickly. The museum contributes columns and tips, as do many local organizations.

Which means you're all set to get out and play. It's summer. Your incredibly creative inner child is calling.

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