

## The Power of Play

Recently I read a story in the Washington Post called “*Teddy Bear, Version 2.0.*” The article describes something called “Webkinz,” - stuffed animal toys that have virtual lives. I have little or no knowledge about the latest in computer toys and games for children, but maybe some of you have heard of this. From what I can understand, the child can purchase a little stuffed animal and then through a process on the website the child “adopts” this pet and tells the computer whether it’s a boy or a girl and the name he/she has chosen for it, then the computer will tell the child about their pet’s “persona”. Then there are lots of activities the child can do on-line with this virtual version of his/her stuffed animal pet. It does look like a fun and interesting activity for kids. But I do wonder about some of the underlying assumptions in this article regarding the value of children and the value of play.

The opening sentences of the Post article state; “In real life all that Megan’s cuddly stuffed animals can do is sit on her bed in her room . . . But online they can play air hockey, whip-up a fish and chills dinner or take a dip in a hot tub.” The assumption seems to be that children are totally dependent on adults to organize and create their play experiences for them. Megan could not possibly think of a pretend world for her stuffed animals without adult direction. Does that ring true to you as parents? Later in the article, an independent toy analyst is quoted as saying; “Play always reflects the adult world”. Maybe we as adults should be more concerned with the play that reflects the child’s world.

.So what is it about play that’s so important? Why does it matter? ***It matters because play is the work children do to make sense of the world around them. Play is essential to the healthy development of children.*** And although much of play can and should involve adults, *adults should not always be directing that play.* In a recent journal article, the American Academy of Pediatrics talks about the value of child-directed play. Research shows that child-driven play allows very young children to “create and explore a world they can master”. Very young children use play to practice adult roles like being the “mommy” or the “daddy” and to work through their fears and insecurities – like pretending to be the “baby” when a new sibling arrives. As children grow and mature, play helps them develop decision-making skills, social skills and resiliency. When children are in charge of their own play they can move at their own pace and explore their own issues and eventually figure out their own passions and interests. The journal article states “If adults are controlling children’s play, children acquiesce to adult’s rules and concerns and lose some of the benefits play offers them, particularly in developing creativity, leadership and group skills.”

So what can we do to make sure our children have lots of opportunities to play in their own way?

- Perhaps the first thing we can do is recognize the real developmental necessity of child-directed play and ensure that we make room in our busy days for that to happen. This is not to say that organized activities as children grow, like sports or

art or theater or academic enrichment are not valuable. They are valuable, but they're not *more* valuable than child-driven play.

- We can make sure children have very limited “screen time”. Again, it’s not that computer or TV is “bad” but it is very passive and it does use up time that might be better spent in active play.
- We can make sure we are living in the present with our children and try very hard not to get swept-up in the cultural mandate to help our children begin building their resumes at birth!
- We can value the time we play with our children, because that time gives us a great opportunity and that can help us understand our children better. It may help us get some insight into concerns they’re dealing with – concerns they may not be able to express verbally.
- We can remind ourselves that when we spend time playing with our children or simply watching them play we are doing something essential: we are giving them our full attention.
- In focusing on our children playing, we may recall something we may have forgotten - how to have fun !

As interesting as this may be, you may be wondering what all this talk about play has to do with Assets. It has everything to do with Assets! The Assets model is grounded in a profound respect for the intrinsic value of children and teens – just as they are. One way we can all be part of this valuing is to recognize, respect and celebrate our children’s ability to create, imagine, run, jump, and pretend all on their own.

**Assets Framework:** Researchers have identified 40 developmental “assets” that have a powerful positive affect on youth – things like positive family communication, school engagement, family boundaries, adult role models and caring neighborhoods. Many of these assets are experienced through relationships with caring adults – adults like you! For more information or to send any feedback on the articles, please contact Mary Ann Moran at [mmoran@arlingtonva.us](mailto:mmoran@arlingtonva.us) or 703-228-1671. You can also visit our website: [www.arlingtonpartnershipforyouth.org](http://www.arlingtonpartnershipforyouth.org)