Dear C&C Families,

City & Country School has held steady for over 90 years that play is the work of children, and is essential to their social and cognitive development. Recently, there has been increased media interest in open-ended free play and scientific research that reveals the benefits of play for children and adults alike. In light of this attention to play, we believe it will interest our community to describe what play means at City & Country. Alongside, we have provided some outside perspectives on play to help you build a deeper sense of how play is understood by various groups and communities.

I hope you gain a greater understanding of how your child benefits from play both at home and at school. Finally, we hope that you will help us spread the word that play is thriving at City & Country School as we continue to be a model for early childhood education. Please feel free to speak with me if you have any other thoughts or questions about play at City & Country School.

Sincerely,

Kate Turley
Principal
Play is Work

Caroline Pratt founded C&C on the belief that play is a child’s natural and most meaningful way of learning. In fact, the School’s original name was “The Play School.” Since the beginning, play at C&C has been the core activity of the children’s daily work. We believe that play is the work of young children. Play is serious work to them. And, that is how young children learn—through play. We offer them open-ended materials (blocks, clay, paper, crayons, paint, water) and invite them to experiment and explore. Through their explorations, the children imagine, think and create. They solve their own problems. They discover new and interesting ways of doing things. It is in play and work with materials that children put things together—their experiences, their information and misinformation—and work very hard to make sense of the world. It is in play that young children—children who are not yet fully capable of expressing themselves in words—can express the depth and breadth of their thoughts and feelings.

“Scientists who study play, in animals and humans alike, are developing a consensus view that play is something more than a way for restless kids to work off steam; more than a way for chubby kids to burn off calories; more than a frivolous luxury. Play, in their view, is a central part of neurological growth and development — one important way that children build complex, skilled, responsive, socially adept and cognitively flexible brains.”

Play is Exploration & Experimentation

In their play, children are experimenting with and exploring their encounters and experiences in the physical and social worlds in which they live. As they work with materials in their play, and encounter the ideas of other children, questions arise, new possibilities are imagined. Within this process of experimenting, exploring, and creating, children are working hard to make sense of the world and their place in it. It is in play that children are giving form to and expressing the meanings and understandings they are constructing.

“Along with other special patterns of play, the curiosity about and playing with ‘objects’ is a pervasive, innately fun pattern of play, and creates its own ‘states’ of playfulness. Early on, toys take on highly personalized characteristics, and as skills in manipulating objects (i.e., banging on pans, skipping rocks, etc.) develop, the richer become the circuits in the brain. Hands playing with all types of objects help brains develop beyond strictly manipulative skills, with play as the driver of this development.” (1)

“From the earliest ‘pretend I’m the mama and you’re the baby,’ play is the model for the life-long practice of trying out new ideas. Pretending is the most open-ended of all activities, providing the opportunity to escape the limitations of established rituals. Pretending enables us to ask ‘What if?’” (2)


“Free time for play is better than no or little play, but it is not enough. For example, social pretend play is an excellent means for exercising and building up the executive functions of working memory (children must hold their own role and those of others in mind), inhibitory control (children must inhibit acting out of character), and cognitive flexibility (children must flexibly adjust to unexpected twists and turns in the evolving plot). But social pretend play doesn’t have much value if children are free to abandon a play scenario after a few moments or are not held accountable for staying within their chosen role.

And play needs to be facilitated by adults who are trained in observing children and in understanding how play contributes to children’s mastery of concepts and skills.

Work with blocks in the Lower School stands out as a hallmark of C&C’s educational practice. Blocks are emphasized because they are an ideal tool for a child’s play. Blocks, like paint, clay, water, and wood-working materials, are open-ended: children must provide the form and meaning, and must do the “work.” Blocks are both fixed and flexible, meaning a child can build something particular with the blocks, but that thing can be taken down, changed or shared. They have infinite possibilities for the imagination, and provide an ideal context for social interaction, as well as independent play.

In the decisions teachers make about space, materials, and time, they create the opportunities for children's active participation and a social atmosphere that will invite children's interests and questions. It is in such working together that a partnership is created between children and teachers.

Additionally, much of the children’s work is grounded in a social study, such as the Vs’ exploration of C&C, both the buildings and people who work in them. What they have learned and observed is reflected as the children build C&C in blocks. When play happens in a tangibly meaningful context, the concepts and skills learned are all the more powerful and relevant.

“When children learn to rely on themselves for playtime — improvising props, making up games and stories — they're actually developing critical cognitive skills, including an important one called ‘executive function,’ they say. Essentially, executive function is the ability to regulate one’s own behavior — a key skill for controlling emotions, resisting impulses and exerting self control and discipline.”

Play is physical, and creating mind body connections is a powerful developmental tool, as children grow. The children of C&C are often using their minds and their bodies to play, especially when they use their fine motor skills at work with wood, clay, paper, drawing tools, paint, water, and indoor blocks. Their gross motor skills are developed outdoors in the Yards with blocks and games that involve running, jumping, balancing, and many other activities that are both mentally and physically intertwined. Children’s physical and cognitive development is supported also in Rhythms. Long-time Rhythms teacher, Sylvia Miller, wrote of play in Rhythms:

“Dramatic play is one of the important parts of the Rhythms Program. It is the most natural thing in the world for children to imitate, to ‘be’ what’s been seen, heard, felt, imagined. Immersed in dramatic play that stems from a trip, book, a discussion, they become boats, people working on a building or in the street or in the firehouse; stemming from their own interest in and knowledge of animals, the sun, stars, space, wind, etc., they become one with their subject. This affords them deep satisfaction and gives them a sense of meaningful activity and well-being, for they are using and reshaping the materials of understood experience.”

“If you don’t understand human movement, you won’t really understand yourself or play. If you do, you will reap the benefits of play in your body, personal life and work situations. Learning about self movement structures an individual’s knowledge of the world - it is a way of knowing, and we actually, through movement and play, think in motion. For example the play-driven movement of leaping upward is a lesson about gravity as well as one’s body. And it lights up the brain and fosters learning. Innovation, flexibility, adaptability, resilience, have their roots in movement. The play-driven pleasures associated with exploratory body movements, rhythmic early speech (moving vocal cords), locomotor and rotational activity - are done for their own sake; pleasurable, and intrinsically playful. They sculpt the brain, and ready the player for the unexpected and unusual.”

The social and emotional benefits of play are immeasurable. Children gain confidence through their sense of mastery of an environment or idea. These experiences also help children to know themselves and others while being able to practice social skills through group play.

Children have abundant energy that is used in play of all kinds, which provides the physical and mental benefits of exercise; at the same time, children experience the emotional satisfaction that comes from creative activity.

Finally, the sheer fun and joy that come from play, especially play that challenges, enlivens, or creates a new perspective, brings a sense of gratification and exhilaration that balances mind and body.

“For humans and other animals, play is a universal training course and language of trust. The belief that one is safe with another being or in any situation is formed over time during regular play. Trust is the basis of intimacy, cooperation, creativity, successful work, and more.”

“The ability of the young child to create their own sense of their mind, and that of others, takes place through pretend play, which continues to nourish the spirit throughout life, and remains key to innovation and creativity. Deprivation studies uphold the importance of this pattern of play, as understanding and trusting others and developing coping skills depends on its presence.”

As the children grow older, play continues to have a place at C&C: in the Yard, in Rhythms, and as the children create their end-of-year Social Studies plays. Most importantly, the children’s habits that come from their many years of play in the Lower School manifest as a playfulness of mind in all subjects. With openness and flexibility, children interact with concepts in context, comfortably manipulate data, experiment, create art, perform music, and consistently seek to understand various perspectives and ideas from the inside out through research and dramatic play.

“Dramatic play helps integrate children's learning, not only at the youngest ages but throughout the entire age range from three to thirteen and perhaps beyond.”
- Jean Murray, former Principal of C&C

“There is a powerful desire in any group of children to take up an idea, pass it around, and give everyone a chance to influence the outcome. This can happen in music and dance, in art and poetry, and extend into math, science and philosophy. But the phenomenon appears first in fantasy play.”

“The children are free to carry out their own purposes and as they grow, these purposes increase in complexity until you have with identical raw material, but increasingly complex tools, the complicated floor schemes, dramatic play, shop products, clay objects, paintings and drawings of the seven-year-olds. Not only are the children exercising their imaginations and ingenuity in reconstructing what they are learning about the world around them, but they are also getting tremendous emotional release and independence.”

- Jean Murray, former Principal of C&C

Philosophy and Practices at City & Country School
This edition of Currents was written by Jennifer Marck with contributing editors: Elise Clark, Jane Clarke, Harriet Cuffaro, Carol Szamatowicz and Kate Turley. C&C Staff write articles, conduct workshops and teach about the subject of play - please speak with us if you would like more information about play at City & Country School.

**Cited Resources**


**Additional Resources**


“The Serious Need for Play” by Melinda Wenner in *Scientific American* (January, 2009): <http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=the-serious-need-for-play>


*International Play Association*: http://www.ipaworld.org “IPA’s world-wide network promotes the importance of play in child development, provides a vehicle for interdisciplinary exchange and action, and brings a child perspective to policy development throughout the world.”

*Alliance for Childhood*: http://www.allianceforchildhood.org “The Alliance for Childhood promotes policies and practices that support children’s healthy development, love of learning, and joy in living.”