



FIRST YEAR AT SCHOOL

KEEPING PLAY FREE

The value of play to children's development is well known. Play is the way they learn, relax and enjoy life.

Children learn best from free play when they can 'own' it, when it is not 'captured' in some way. Even as adults we do not like our play being captured. We don't like it when someone tells us how to do it better, or joins in and changes the rules. Yet often we capture children's play in these and other ways with the best intentions.

The concept of captured play was developed by an American psychologist, Dr James Garbarino, who says that 'we as caring and knowledgeable adults need to be guarantors and monitor ... as we serve as advocates for free play in the lives of children ... We want them to be free to play' (Garbarino & Manly, 1996).

So how do adults capture children's play? There are many ways.

Think of a group of boys making up rules for a game. They take a long time making up the rules so it looks as if they will never get to the game. An adult comes along and suggests some rules to help them get on with the game, but in this case making up rules is the game. Learning about rules is important for children and this is one of the ways they do it.

Or think of a young girl making a building with blocks that looks too curved to be a real building. An adult comes along and says: 'Your building needs to have straight walls'. The young girl says: 'But I was building a rainbow'.

In both cases an adult has captured the play and turned it into something different.

There are some times when free play needs some intervention. Perhaps a child is getting frustrated, or getting tired of doing something that is no longer a challenge. *The secret is to watch the child and respond to their feeling and to what they want or need from you.* If you are unsure, it is usually helpful just to say what you see: 'I can see you are making a tall building', 'I can see you are trying very hard to draw that'.

Sometimes strong feelings will capture a child's social play so the child is not free to express himself/herself. In Vivian Paley's book, *The boy who would be a helicopter* (Paley, 1990), a young boy is unable to play freely and socially because of worries, but plays in a limited and rigid way, always as a helicopter. Eventually a young girl enters into the play on his terms by offering to be the mummy helicopter while he is the baby helicopter, and this frees him to begin to enter play with the other children.

While we know free play is important, it is easy to do things that capture it. We need to respect children's ownership of their play and to remember that they live in an adult world, a world of rules and 'Don't do that' and 'This is how you do this' and 'It's time to go here now'. Play is their time for being children, as long as it is free play. Children love parents to join in when invited, but let the child be the leader.



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