

CONNECTING

Healthy Information from the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center  November/December 2009

The Work of Play

What is play? It is spontaneous, fun, free – a means with no end. A seemingly purposeless process from which springs joy. It is the creative expression of Self through every age and stage that says “I am alive!” Play is about accessing that which is vital – the life spark.

Play is not productive in a quantitative sense and it is not about rules. Play is not about winning and losing, but rather about presence and experience. Play is enormously significant for both children and adults.



There is growing evidence that the learning of emotional control, social competency, personal resiliency and continuing curiosity are accomplished largely through developmentally appropriate play experiences.

Play is the occupation of childhood. Play provides a space for the “greening” or development of the young Self. It is the mirror where the child first glimpses its Self as fun, beautiful, and worthy of the time and energy of another. It is where life experience is assimilated. It is where life experience is mastered. It is where life experience is communicated.

Play begins at a very young age. Babies play with their primary caregivers and vice versa. When a parent is smiling at an infant and the baby laughs spontaneously, it is the baby’s first experience of the joy found in relationship through play. These early play experiences transmit messages such as “you are very special” and “it is fun to be with you” and “it’s okay for you to change the rules or create something new.” Play is the activity that allows children to explore and master their world without fear of judgment.



Play is a presence that does not mete out rewards and punishments contingent upon performance. What is deemed “good” is just being together and celebrating whatever happens. There is little room for cautionary statements, admonishments, or limitations. Play becomes the medium for conversation and relationship. Sometimes the conversation is issue specific as when

a child recreates a divorce scene with toy animals in a sand tray. Sometimes the “conversation” is more abstract as when a child creates a shield with pictures cut out from magazines of things about herself that “protect” her in the world. Sometimes play relates to specific coping skills (e.g., tolerating frustration) and sometimes it is just about BEING in relationship (e.g., constructing an airport out of masking tape on the office floor).



This is what play is at C.O.O.L. (Children Overcoming the Obstacles of Life), the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center’s child and adolescent program. It is the fort made from two chairs, a prayer shawl, a couple of bean bag chairs, and a construction paper sign. It is the child hiding under the bean bag chairs in the waiting room and a therapist who gingerly sits on top lamenting the “absence” of the child. It is a child stacking bean bag chairs on top of a therapist to build a volcanic mountain that erupts when the child climbs on top. It is the “Topsy Turvey Rule” that says, “If you win, you lose and if you lose, you win” that a child can invoke anytime during any game. Play in this context is not structured in a traditional sense but is free-form where rules are mutable and even able to be totally eliminated. Thus, a regular checkers game can become “give away checkers” where the goal of the game is to lose all your pieces rather than capture all the opponent’s pieces.

Many children come to C.O.O.L. fearful about being judged, fearful about being “less than,” fearful about losing and losing out. We live in a highly competitive world that tends to promote these kinds of fears. In play, children are often exposed to games that are only about winning and losing where the messages they seem to have learned are that you are only worthwhile if you win, get an “A,” are first in line, etc. At C.O.O.L. we try to change that up. Games are over before there is a conclusion just to take out the competitive aspect. “Rules” are changed over and over just because it might be fun or interesting to do so. What is immutable is the caring, spontaneously fun relationship between the