

Children's Discovery Workshop

How
Everyone
Can Grow
Through
Constructive
Play

Walter F. Drew and Marcia L. Nell

“Nothing lights up a child’s brain like play.”

—Stuart Brown, MD
Founder, National Institute for Play

Children’s discovery workshop

Karen Harrison, prekindergarten teacher at Dairy Road Discovery Center Preschool, takes the class on a field trip to the Children’s Workshop at the Reusable Resources Adventure Center (RRAC) in Melbourne, Florida. At the workshop the children will be free to invent and discover new possibilities for using unwanted materials from local businesses. Playing with these materials is an enjoyable way for young children to learn to focus and control their attention. It teaches children and adults alike the value of recycling and reusing resources wisely.

WALTER F. DREW, EdD, is the founder of the Institute for Self Active Education, creator of Dr. Drew’s Discovery Blocks, and a facilitator for Florida AEYC’s Play Committee and the Reusable Resources Adventure Center, www.reusecenterbrevard.org. Since 1975 he has pioneered the development of reusable resource centers as a sustainable community-building strategy that provides open-ended materials for play and learning. He coauthored *From Play to Practice: Connecting Teachers’ Play to Children’s Learning* (NAEYC, 2013).

MARCIA L. NELL, PhD, is an associate professor at Millersville University, in Millersville, Pennsylvania, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate early childhood education courses and supervises student teachers. She is director of research for the Institute for Self Active Education and a facilitator for NAEYC’s Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum. She coauthored *From Play to Practice: Connecting Teachers’ Play to Children’s Learning* (NAEYC, 2013).



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS

During their visit, the 15 preschoolers gather around a very long table covered with an abundant variety of open-ended materials. Dr. Drew welcomes the children and invites them to explore the materials. Raising one finger in the air he asks them to play quietly by themselves for just one minute without talking. For nearly 10 minutes, the 4- and 5-year-olds focus intently and engage freely in solitary constructive play. The children transform blue and gray foam rectangles of various shapes and sizes, along with red and yellow plastic caps, into dazzling arrays of three-dimensional structures.

Next, Dr. Drew talks to the whole group. *Another couple of seconds and then we'll take a few minutes to talk about what we made. It's amazing what everybody did, and you each did something different. Thank you for being such great explorers, scientists, builders, designers, and creators.*

The children excitedly share their stories, naming and describing what they made.

This is a mouth eating a hundred sandwiches.

This is where somebody does magic.

This is a flower. I made a flower garden.



I built a bridge, and a ramp, and this is a pool.

The Children's Workshop experience benefits three groups simultaneously—the children, the teachers, and the families who accompany the class on the field trip.

Children

The children initiate and guide their own wondering, discovering, exploring, and learning. No one tells them what to do. Other than asking them to play quietly, adults set no restrictions or limitations. The children experience a sense of freedom and competency.

As she observed the children, Karen noted, "The children are discovering the properties of different materials and getting ideas on how to organize and put things together in complex patterns. Sorting and organizing materials to make things is a wonderful way to develop concepts and skills in math, science, and literacy."

Teachers

For teachers, the workshop is relaxing and liberating. They can observe new ways of teaching and interacting with young children and consider new approaches to using materials in the classroom. Teachers gain a different view of the children's interests, capabilities, skills, and thought processes.

Karen reflected on her experience: "I was surprised the children were focused and engaged for such a long time. I was amazed to see what they made. I didn't think they would have this much imagination and ability to build. As a result, I decided to gather some of these same materials from the center and try this activity in my classroom."

Families

The family members witness the children's excitement and gain a new understanding of the role of play in children's learning. They observe children's strengths, areas of interests, and the thinking used to solve problems.



Back in the classroom

Karen's plan is to offer a variety of open-ended materials, invite the children to explore, and see what happens next. She moves several tables together to make one long table, like the one at the RRAC. Then she sprinkles gray and blue foam pieces, red and yellow caps, soft white foam cylinders, and clear plastic test tubes that she gathered from the RRAC. She invites the children to build and explore, this time leaving them free to talk and share as they play.

The children describe what they create.

This is a jungle with fire ants and camper vans.

I made a flying car with one wheel in front and two in back.

This time mine is a birthday cake.

To extend the activity, Karen asks the children, "Would you like to fasten what you made?" She distributes toothpicks, and the children use them to connect the parts they have assembled. A little later she offers to hot-glue their constructions. Working with one child at a time, she attaches the materials per their individual instructions. The activity moves from open-ended play

Watch Karen's class explore the materials during the workshop at youtu.be/HZk2UGVt9zo.

Watch adults explore materials during the 2013 NAEYC National Institute for Professional Development "From Play to Practice" workshop at youtu.be/nmRwQqhzIWM.

to building 3-D structures the children carry home with them.

One parent, upon seeing what her son made, commented, "He was so excited to show me the flying car. He was happy to see that he could make something on his own. As a parent I felt proud. He loves to learn and be creative and forward-thinking on his own."

As Natalie Ward, owner and director of the Dairy Road Discovery Center Preschool, explains, "Getting out into the community, exploring and using local resources, and involving parents with their children is an essential part of our school's success. We encourage the children to explore and have fun interacting with each other as they express their creativity."

Much of what happens in these happy moments of constructive play is impossible to describe. Only a small part of the joy and learning richness can be expressed and shared with words.

TYC

Free or inexpensive materials for children to explore

Many of these reusable, open-ended materials are available from local businesses or resource centers. Look online for resource centers at www.reuseresources.org/find-a-center.html.

- Foam rectangles, circles, and squares in various sizes, colors, and textures
- Colorful lids and plastic caps
- String, yarn, ribbon, and zippers
- Fabric sample swatches and strips
- Mat board
- Paper tubes
- Cardboard boxes, big and small
- Self-adhesive contact paper
- Toothpicks, small sticks, and twigs
- Wire, pipe cleaners, and twist ties
- Buttons, beads, bangles, and odd jewelry pieces
- Wood blocks, scrap end cuts, and wood turnings
- Seashells, pebbles, and polished river rocks
- Feathers



RESOURCE

Nell, M.L., & W.F. Drew. 2013. *From Play to Practice: Connecting Teachers' Play to Children's Learning*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.