



Developing fine and gross motor skills as children learn through play

Let's Play!

Photos & text by Seenaryo

In Finland, homework is banned, children don't start school until the age of seven and primary school is overtly play-based. Despite this non-academic approach, children there do exceptionally well in most academic tests.

How is it that children who spend less time reading and writing in the early years end up better at reading and writing later on?

Perhaps because before children can read, they need to have first mastered skills within the brain's five developmental areas:

1. Social
2. Emotional
3. Physical
4. Cognitive
5. Language

When children spend their day sitting at a table learning letters, only two of these areas improve:

cognitive and written language. However, it's possible, even likely, children will get bored and give up because they're not being afforded the chance to develop the emotional skill to persevere. And this life skill, like all life skills, is only honed when a child is developing as a whole.

How can we teach life skills?

Well, frustratingly, not by trying to teach children directly such as in a life skills 'lesson' where perhaps you'd sit around and talk about resilience. Instead, a holistic play-based approach is needed. Friedrich Fröbel (the founder of the first kindergarten) knew this well. He believed that play is the "highest expression of human development in a child."

Maria Montessori later developed these philosophies through her child-centred approach.

The reason play is so effective is because it achieves a two-for-one: children who learn through play "end up equally good or better at reading and writing. They are more likely to become well-adjusted, healthy people," say Edward Miller and Joan Almon, two American educationalists who argue strongly against the United States' national obsession with standardised tests.

At this stage, we don't need to sit around advocating for play. Schools know it, teachers know it and most Ministries of Education know it. So why hasn't someone bottled this elixir and handed it out en masse? Child-centred teaching requires a high adult-to-child ratio and play can only be delivered by teachers who don't need to rely on textbooks. Here's what's needed now:

- **Accessible and effective technology:** The Seenaryo Playkit is one example for teachers (teachers rather than children – as increasing young children's screen-time is definitely not the goal)
- **Investment in upskilling teachers:** This involves teacher training to develop new skills, minimising skill gaps and trusting teachers to do their jobs
- **Return to play:** After 70 years of over-emphasis on literacy and numeracy, let's return to what those early practitioners knew all along, and play!



Teachers and facilitators, and even parents can deliver play-based learning



Children engaging in play-based learning activities



Play-based teaching in a classroom in Lebanon



A Seenaryo Playkit training with teachers (Azraq Camp, 2019)

Life skills worth learning

By learning new skills, we increase our understanding of the world around us and equip ourselves with the tools we need to live a more productive and fulfilling life. Here are two essential life skills:

Self-Regulation: When faced with an undesired outcome, some people might respond with an outburst or, if it's a child, a tantrum. Learning how to control our reactions helps us make more balanced decisions. Moving and freezing games, such as 'Grandmother's Footsteps' (see sidebar) or 'Musical Statues', help children learn how to control impulses

Communication: Teachers, parents and caregivers who give children space and time to speak and ask questions, and lead activities are laying the groundwork for good communication skills as adults. Modelling and practising effective listening skills at a young age can equip children to lead healthier social lives in the future

How to play 'Grandmother's Footsteps'

Someone is the *teta* or *jiddo* and this person stands at the far end of the room, with their back turned to the rest of the group. The rest of the group stands at the opposite end of the room in a line. The idea is that they have to sneak up on *teta* or *jiddo*. But at any point, the grandparent can turn around. When they do, everyone has to freeze! Anyone seen moving by *teta* or *jiddo* is either 'out' or sent back to the end of the line. The aim is to get close enough to tap *teta* or *jiddo* on the shoulder. Whoever manages to touch them first then becomes the next *teta* or *jiddo*.

Seenaryo Playkit App offers examples of structured, holistic, play-based activities that are ideal for younger students. Seenaryo is a theatre and play-based learning organisation.

Visit Seenaryoplaykit.org

