

## The Importance of Discovery Play

Discovery or heuristic play is a vital ingredient in the overall development of the young child. A while ago, I mentioned Jean Piaget as an influential name in observing and acknowledging the importance of childhood and the prime concern to allow children opportunities to grow, develop skills and build up a bank of knowledge and experiences that will support them through to adulthood. His theory of the stages of play is linked very closely to the development of cognition or mental awareness and the ability to think independently. Piaget theorised that young children up to two years of age are programmed to explore their environment and the articles in it. During this period in their life, the child acquires the ability to move from one space to another. They do this by developing a crawl or shuffle, then eventually stand, step and walk. This means the child can explore their world and take further steps towards independence. Elinor Goldschmied (&em&gt;People Under Three&em&gt; Routledge 1993) understood the value of every day objects to assist children in their learning and understanding. She developed the idea of a treasure basket - a box filled with objects and items that can be found in the home or in the outer environment. There should be no plastic items. Consider what a young child can achieve in the first two years of their lives :-

- the ability to become mobile;
- the understanding of and reproduction of their native language;
- their developing independence towards making decisions about which foods they like or dislike;
- their skill in discriminating between people they trust and who are familiar compared to those who are strangers and therefore untrustworthy.

We cannot be surprised that in all this time, through their five senses, they are also beginning to understand the matter of what their world is about. If we provide a safe, secure opportunity to discover the properties of familiar objects, then their use or application also becomes more easily understood. More children than ever are now spending time away from home and family, being cared for by professionals who sometimes take their work too seriously and actually forget about the important aspects of child care, that of real discovery and adventure for the child. We are trained and warned about the importance of hygienic surroundings and clean play materials. We have been brainwashed to provide safety for children by excluding all potentially perceived dangers. It is time that we took stock of this and actually offered children what they need and deserve. In the home, most children will eventually find their way to the cupboards, especially in the kitchen, where they can pull out and play with a variety of saucepans, lids, wooden spoons, rolling pins, whisks and so on. This is, in part, what a treasure basket will also provide. Plastic may be much easier to keep clean, but what does it actually offer to a child driven to explore? It is usually taste-free, apart from the plastic flavour. It is smooth, until it is chewed beyond recognition. It takes on the temperature of the immediate environment, it is usually coloured in bright poster paints which bear no relevance to natural materials. Household objects, including glass lemon squeezers, pans, and spoons, all have their own temperature and taste. The addition of fresh citrus fruit offers a smorgasbord of flavour, colour, texture and sound. Fir cones, sea shells, large pebbles all add to the rich tapestry of experiences that the young child will relish and explore for much longer than the time they take to play with a plastic, synthetic play object. The adult adds the safety; they stay close to the child, not interfering or speaking, but smiling in a reassuring way, checking that the materials are free from breaks or tears that could cause injury. It is fascinating to see how each child approaches this treasure trove. Freed from adult-led direction, they make choices, develop their methods of exploration and even communicate with their peers. The articles can be washed or replaced at very little cost, leaving the child and adult lots of scope for new adventures. Every nursery should offer this invaluable resource for learning. Every parent should become familiar and confident with the use of non-synthetic play materials. The young child's life will be much richer as a consequence.

### About the Author

News about the Natural Resources Defense Council. Commentary and archival information about the Natural Resources Defense Council from The New York Times.

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