

Child's Play

It's Serious Stuff

By: Tina Dealwis



“Play is often talked about as it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is a way to cope with life and to prepare for adulthood. Playing is a way to solve problems and to express feelings. In fact, play is the real work of childhood.”

Television icon Fred Rogers, from the book *You Are Special*

Five years ago, twins Caylee and Brianna Mackey, now eight years old, attended a summer camp program at Hattie Larlham.

While they don't have disabilities themselves, they attended the integrated camp with children who do. Their lives were forever changed. Their siblings Johnny Rose, age seven, and Logan, five, have since attended the same camp at the Mantua, Ohio-based center. They have all found deep connections with the other kids there, a strong compassion and intuitive ability to oblige a variety of unique needs. They've forged potential lifelong friendships. But most of all, they just love to play with their new friends. It's as simple as that.

Play is fundamental in a child's life. Through play children develop cognitive, problem-solving, and social skills. Play also breaks down barriers and lays the foundation for adult relationships.

Thirteen-year-old Austin Warner has autism and knows all about the benefits of play. His parents chose to home-school him to protect him from possible social difficulties a public school education could present. As a result, other than speech therapy and swimming lessons, Austin didn't have much interaction with larger groups of kids.

“Because of his needs, he can be isolated,” says his father Daniel Warner. “Other kids don't actively engage him,” he adds. Warner works at Hattie Larlham. The kids camp at his workplace afforded Austin the chance to really socialize with other children and have fun. “For him, it has really opened up some new doors. He has something to look forward to, and it breaks the routine of schoolwork,” voices Warner. “It's marked down in his calendar and he counts down the days. He knows everybody there, and he talks about the different projects and activities they do.” Warner emphasizes that without the camp and other recreational activities, such as playing

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baseball and taking swimming lessons, Austin's life would be very different. “It has a huge impact on his life, bringing some normalcy to it.” The Therapy Director at Hattie Larlham is Ingrid Kanics who maintains that play is vital for both children and adults alike. “Play is so core to who we are as human beings. It's not just something about childhood... it's where we discover the world and expand our way of thinking about things. The further away we are from it, the more miserable we are,” she assures. Three years ago Noah Battey, who has autism, wouldn't make eye contact with others, and didn't understand the concept of personal space. “For the first three years of his life, he didn't want to interact with anyone,” discloses his mother Lynn Battey. “He just lived in his own little world.”



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oah's parents enrolled him in two camps at Hattie Larlham: one for children with autism, and the other an integrated camp. He, along with the Mackey children, uses the center's state-of-the-art Play Center, which opened in early 2009. Noah is making remarkable advances, shares his mom. "Noah is a completely different child than he was three years ago," she smiles. "He's more comfortable now, and everything about the autism has done better as a result of play."

Play is something children can be in charge of, which is important for their development. In his book *You Are Special*, the late Fred Rogers, children's educational TV personality and pioneer, writes: "Play of a child's own making is a must, because it's how children come to learn so many important things about being human."

Joan Almon, Executive Director of the Alliance for Childhood (United States), agrees. "An organized sport for example, is still an adult-run activity," she explains, "which makes it different than when a group of kids get together and play. It's different because when kids are in charge, they make the rules, and adjust things as needed."

The benefits of play are certainly not left on the playground. They also translate to the classroom, notes Dr. Ernie Dettore. "The academic implications are phenomenal," he conveys. "It helps with their ability to construct knowledge about the world around them. Negotiation and problem-solving skills are by-products of playing with other children."

Warner will attest to Dr. Dettore's assertion. He agrees that play has had a positive impact on son Austin's school performance. "Every activity helps him in some function with his schoolwork. All his activities work together to help him with that. It all helps in creating a better Austin and a more controlled Austin."

Play also helps children to learn to deal with failure. "It gives kids the resiliency to experience failure if a project or experiment doesn't work. They can go back and revise their hypothesis. It's similar to the scientific method," describes Dr. Dettore.

Play can also be an important part of helping children to explore and make decisions about their future careers. Hedda Sharapan, Director of Early Childhood Initiatives at Family Communications Inc., founded by Fred Rogers, remembers that when she was a child, she used to pretend to play a role on a television show. Today, she works in television. "You never know where the seeds of children's play will lead them," she says. "Play is where those ideas are set and that creativity is fostered, not confined by rules."

In his book *Life's Journeys According to Mister Rogers*, Fred Rogers contends that "children's play is not just kids' stuff. Children's play is rather the stuff of most future inventions." Rogers poses this question to his readers: "Think about how many people played about going to the moon before that was ever a reality. Let your imagination help you to know the truth about your identity."

But today's society has made it difficult for children to play as they

did in the past. Parents don't feel safe allowing their children to roam freely, and with busy schedules and many hours spent playing electronic games, children are not having the free play that they used to. "We began getting away from play in the mid-'80s," Dr. Dettore observes. "Play is such a natural thing, but we are imposing adult practices on children. Children are highly pressured these days. Play may have been replaced by more and more new things they have on their plates."

"People who play well, really live life well," Almon assesses. "Play deprivation is a terrible thing." She says that our society has become less willing to take risks, which is a big obstacle to play. "We've become a very risk-averse society," she notes. "Play has its risks. Children get bumps and bruises." But Almon explains that children will often figure out their own comfort levels when playing. "They learn what they can do, and what they can't. They'll stretch to come to a higher level of risk and how to handle it," she offers.

"Kids aren't out in the neighbourhood, out in the backyard," agrees Sharapan. "It's a lot easier to have them sit in their rooms with their DVDs and their Wii.

Electronic games and a heightened sense of safety have driven kids indoors." What can parents do to foster play in

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Hedda Sharapan



their children's lives? Warner says that as a parent, searching out the programs available for children with disabilities is a big challenge. "It's tough. Had I not worked here at Hattie Larlham, I may not have known about it," he admits. "The biggest problem facing parents of kids with special needs is finding out which programs are available." He recommends that parents network as much as possible, and be active in their child's play life. He suggests other parents can be a valuable resource.

"It takes an enormous amount of involvement," he says. "You have to be diligent in your search for opportunities out there, whether on the web or in magazines... to seek out help and additional services." Battey recommends that parents look for organizations in their city or town, and then do a thorough screening process to make sure it is a good fit. "Meet the people first," she recommends. "Observe for awhile, see how the child is integrating — that way parents can be part of the process. It may take time. Don't make a decision on the first visit. Give your child time to get used to the place."

"Help your child create friendships," encourages Sharapan. "Kids feel more comfortable taking risks if they have a friend there with them." Finding mentors, coaches, and people who are involved in



various recreational activities can also be vital. "There are some really wonderful and inspiring people working in this field," she promotes. "Help those people get to know your child and help your child get to know them. We need adults who value and promote play." Sharapan continues: "When adults value play, they make it work for their children and families."

Almon agrees. "Human beings have an innate desire to play," she says, "and parents should cultivate that in their children. Play should be viewed as a basic in life and parents need to stimulate that urge to play in children." She compares play to learning language, in that

a child has an urge to learn language, but needs to be exposed to it in order for it to develop. Similarly, children have a deep-felt urge to play, but if no-one gets down on the floor with them, or gives them a toy to play with, that urge weakens."

With parents' encouragement, and facilities like Hattie Larlham, children will continue to create memories, reap the many benefits that play can provide, and cultivate the friendships that will stay with them for many years to come.

Editor's Note: Fred Rogers was an enormous advocate of play. Look for more on the life's work of Mr. Rogers, and his legacy, in the next issue of *Play to Podium*.

Hattie Larlham • A Legacy to a Life's Work

located in Mantua, Ohio, Hattie Larlham provides on-site and community services to approximately 1,500 people with disabilities. From long-term residential care, to summer day camps, the facility is dedicated to serving the needs of children and adults with disabilities.

It was founded in 1961 by Hattie Larlham, a nurse, who saw her neighbour's family struggling to take care of their daughter who had hydrocephalus. Hattie and her husband took the child into their home and took care of her. "She started with one child, and now we're providing services to 1,500 people," says Bill Wahl, Communications Coordinator at Hattie Larlham. "Her mission was to provide comfort, joy, and achievement for people with disabilities, and we continue to strive to achieve that."

In January 2009, the centre unveiled a 7,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art Play Center as part of a larger renovation project called the Hope at Work Project. The Play Center is a child's wonderland. There are toys and activ-



ities for children of all ages and abilities, including plexi-glass walls to draw on, a music area, art room, and a multi-sensory room. "It's a wonderful, welcoming, safe place for children of all abilities to play and interact with each other," says Carolyn Lehman, Director of the Hattie Larlham Center for Children with Disabilities.

The Play Center was carefully designed to meet the needs of all levels of disabilities. Ingrid Kanics, Therapy Director at Hattie Larlham, explains that how a facility like Play Center is designed can make a huge difference for children with disabilities. "Kids with disabilities have the same, innate drive as other kids, but they might just do it differently. With play, they have that opportunity to really interact with their peers. If the facility is designed properly, the disability disappears in the mix."

To learn more Hattie Larlham's life's work and her legacy facility visit www.hattielarlham.org.