

Sleep and Play: How they are Connected and Support the Young Child's Growth

In November, WECAN held a conference at Sophia's Hearth for birth to 3 caregivers entitled, The Power of Play: Exploring the Science and Practice of Play in the First Three Years. In this conference, Pikler Pedagogues, Anna Ruth Meyer and Liz Hagerman brought us the relationship between early brain development and the play of the young child from infancy on.

We explored the stages of play, the role of the caregiver, and the environment in supporting the nourishing play of infants and toddlers. For self-initiated play to unfold, a safe place to discover and the unobtrusive presence of a loving caregiver so the infant can explore without the sense of direction or failure is required. This is also important in toddler play as they begin to discover how to be mindful of the other while understanding themselves. Dr. Emmi Pikler devoted her life to observing and caring for infants and toddlers. She developed three pillars of working with young children: the respectful and present care of the adult, allowing the child time and space for freedom of movement and then self-initiated play. Each capacity is reliant on the other and provides the foundation for the lifelong skills of trust, self-confidence, and self-love, as well as interest and compassion for others and the world.

The value that self-initiated play activity has for the overall well-being and development of infants and toddlers is profound and yet quite misunderstood in our culture today. As a Waldorf parent and teacher, I knew how sacred, independent, imaginative play was for the young child from 3-7yrs, but it wasn't until I worked with infants and toddlers that I understood the vital role of play in these first years on the life-long capacities and skills of the human being.

In my Parent & Tot classes, we often talk about play, rhythm, warmth, nourishment, imitation, and so on. But can you guess the topic that comes up the most? The topic that overwhelms parents to distraction – and for good reason? The topic we always return to no matter what we start talking about? Sleep!

Sleep is quite literally what keeps parents up at night and not just the lack of it. We simply can not engage wholeheartedly in life without it, and neither can our children. So, like play, sleep relates to everything the young child does – especially how they eat, grow, and play. In sleep, growth hormones are released and integrated, cells are repaired, waste is released, physical and mental restoration occurs, and, of course, we dream. All of these activities in the night affect how the young child plays because rest is needed for the child to have interest and stamina in their play, but what may be less known is the relationship between how the young child plays and how they sleep. It isn't just about how hard a child plays or how much energy they expend so they are tired enough to sleep but whether the young child is given the uninterrupted space and time to initiate the beautiful free play that is their birthright! The more they get to play freely from birth to 7, the more capacity they will have to explore, find independence, and ultimately self-soothe. The ability to find comfort in

their own space and within their bodies allows the young child to drift off to sleep peacefully without external stimulation. This lays the foundation for our whole life. Not surprisingly, babies and young children need the same type of environment for self-initiated play as they do for nourishing sleep:

- A warm, safe and cozy space
- All their care needs are met in a respectful, gentle and fully present way
- Love and attunement by their caregiver
- Time and a nourishing and unhurried rhythm

When these are provided for them regularly, children will naturally feel content to be on their own and play or rest. Then, the magic can unfold.

~ Somer Serpe, www.harmoniouschild.com