

Submission
No 131

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

‘Play is the highest form of research,’

Albert Einstein.

My name is . I home educate my two children, a thirteen year old boy and a ten year old girl. This is my personal submission to this Inquiry into Home Education in NSW. I also wrote a submission with my husband, (submission #), and was one of the authors of the Home Education Association’s (HEA) submission. I have written this submission for three reasons. Firstly, I wanted to address an area that seems not to have been covered by any of the submissions so far published – that is, the important role that play has in child development and learning; secondly, I wanted to address one of the claims made by Mr Coutts-Trotter in the Family and Community Services (FaCS) submission to this Inquiry by presenting evidence that the effectiveness of play therapy for children with a history of trauma is increased when delivered by the parent-carer and that educational outcomes are improved when there is parental involvement in learning activities within the home; and thirdly, to argue that home education is uniquely placed to provide adequate time for free play, due to the flexibility of modes of delivery of the curriculum requirements. This submission is relevant to Terms of Reference b)iii and vi and c)ii and iv.

Summary

Free play – and play therapy for those children who require it – is an important part of children’s physical, emotional and intellectual development, and healing¹. Children who have experienced trauma and neglect are enabled to begin to heal and learn by play and play therapy, which is effective in remediating some of the effects of trauma². Furthermore, these children, and others, who find it impossible to learn in a classroom environment can learn by playing and doing. Meta-analysis of research into play therapy outcomes demonstrates that the best outcomes occur when parent-carers are directly engaged in supporting children in the process³. Evidence also demonstrates that parent-carers involvement in any child’s learning activities at home is directly related to intellectual achievement⁴. The NSW Syllabuses code many skills which can easily be acquired incidentally, during the course of everyday life or play, without requiring extensive planning on the part of the parent-educator, or school-like lessons – in fact, such extensive planning limits important learning opportunities for children.

Discussion

In an age when living appears to be codified in the syllabuses of institutional schooling and sometimes reinvented as bookwork (for example, worksheets about basic transport – Human Society and Its Environment (HSIE) in years 1-2; sandwich making

¹ (Gray, 2011)

² (Blanco & Ray, 2011; Bratton, Ray, Rhine, & Jones, 2005)

³ (Bratton et al., 2005)

⁴ (Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012)

– Tourism, Hospitality and Events in year 12), many home educating parents are reclaiming play as an essential part of their children’s education. It has been long established that children in our modern era have increasingly less time for free play and experimentation⁵. As our syllabuses balloon, younger and younger children are given increasing amounts of bookwork and homework in an attempt to give them the best possible start in life. Adding to this, risk averse planning has led to playgrounds without the physical or intellectual challenges they once contained; children are hemmed in on all sides. In our society’s reasonable desire to educate and protect children and provide for the needs of neglected children, we have inadvertently restricted children’s learning to an unjustifiable extent.

All animals learn through play. Human beings are animals. Play is an essential part of children’s intellectual development. Play helps children acquire and assimilate competencies in all areas, including intellectual competencies⁶. Although some children learn quite well in an institutional environment, such an environment limits important learning (play) opportunities including, for example, vertical play opportunities (playing with children both older and younger)⁷. Neuroscience has, additionally, demonstrated the importance of time spent idling, or daydreaming, to optimal brain functioning⁸. Many children who cannot learn in the outdated sedentary and paper-based style of school learn by doing and through play, yet increasing amounts of homework, teaching to the test and adult-led extra-curricular activities further encroach into previously free play territory.

It has been demonstrated that the effects of trauma are ameliorated when children who have experienced trauma are allowed time in play therapy (especially when it is child-led) to play through their experiences and through developmental stages they may have missed due to their poor beginnings⁹. However, the importance of establishing a positive attachment pattern after a child’s attachment development is disrupted is, additionally, essential to good outcomes for such children¹⁰. This can only occur when adequate time is spent with a parent-carer and is testament to the importance of such play ‘work,’ which has been shown in a meta-analysis of research to be more effective when facilitated by the parent-carer than by professionals¹¹. The importance of the parent-carer in facilitating the best outcomes is supported by research that shows that, in the general population also, parental involvement in educational activities in the home has a positive impact on educational outcomes that is not achieved by parental

⁵ (Gray, 2011; Holt, 1972)

⁶ (Gray & Feldman, 2004; Landreth, Ray, & Bratton, 2009)

⁷ (Gray & Feldman, 2004)

⁸ (Smart, 2013)

⁹ (Appleyard & Osofsky, 2003; Bratton et al., 2005)

¹⁰ (Perry, 2001)

¹¹ (Bratton et al., 2005)

involvement at school¹². This directly contradicts statements made by Mr Coutts-Trotter in the Family and Community Services (FaCS) submission made to this Inquiry, that

*'Evidence shows a specialist educational environment and support is best offered to these [Out of Home Care] children within formal educational environments where access to specialist skills and resources are provided by **educational specialists**' (my emphasis).*

Assuming such evidence exists (Mr Coutts-Trotter failed to provide references), it is unlikely that home educated children were included in the sample. I have personally observed home educating parents-carers facilitate their children's needs, having sought specialist assistance. Once obtained, such assistance is frequently employed by parent-carers to very good effect in a way that would not be possible in an institutional environment or by the specialists themselves. Furthermore, these parents have also been able to adapt such strategies based on their own observations and knowledge of the child's needs. For example, I have observed a friend of mine adapting her ward's educational program to include therapy, allow time to repair his disordered attachment (due to his traumatic history), and tailor his learning and learning environment to his complex needs (including visits to appropriate specialists). She acts as parent, case manager, therapist, but, above all, she (and her family) provide a safe environment in which these processes can occur. I have also witnessed the remediation of attachment disorders in more than one child, only possible because the children have had extensive time with their (new) parent-carer – only possible in the home education setting.

In speaking of the average population (that is, not of children who have experienced trauma), Gray contends that the increased incidence of psychopathology in children is directly related to the decrease in opportunities for free play¹³. He makes a link between the intrinsic motivation engendered by play and psychological health. His argument is that because children experience much less control over their lives, due to less and less free time, and because a sense of control over one's life is positively related to good psychological health, this severely limited ability to claim agency in their lives is impacting negatively on children's psychological wellbeing¹⁴. Children require free play in order to thrive intellectually, emotionally and psychologically, but the modern world severely limits opportunities for such play. Home education redresses this imbalance by naturally providing flexible and efficient curriculum delivery.

Natural Learning is not an educational void. It allows children's natural interests and play to be responded to by the parent-educator in order to maximise deep learning and yet it allows children agency in their lives. It promotes intellectual, creative and emotional development, as well as psychological health. I have observed my children consolidating their schoolwork through play; I have observed my children

¹² (Emerson et al., 2012)

¹³ (Gray, 2011)

¹⁴ (Gray, 2011)

strengthening their weak areas through play. I have also observed my children processing experiences through play.

An experienced special education teacher and lecturer expressed to me that all children will learn by 'doing.' My daughter has a learning disability. Free play allows her to remediate her weak areas and access and extend her interests and strengths beyond what would be possible in a fully adult-led learning environment. We are eclectic home educators. Allowing time for free play is one deliberate educational strategy we use. Her free play leads to physical development (trampolining, climbing, balancing), creative expression (writing poetry, drawing, sewing, cooking), and scientific exploration (investigating nature, finding information in libraries or online). Natural Learning is another strategy and adult-led learning is a third. Observation of my daughter's play is *one* tool I use to assess her needs and progress.

Conclusion

Particularly in recent times, many of BoSTES' staff have shown themselves unqualified to judge the needs of home educated children, to the detriment of those children. It is important that any person involved in the assessment of home education has a broad understanding of both pedagogical approaches and different learning styles, as well as the challenges that children may face in their learning journey. As John Holt stated in an interview:

'... the human animal is a learning animal; we like to learn; we are good at it; we don't need to be shown how or made to do it. What kills the processes are the people interfering with it or trying to regulate it or control it'¹⁵.

Thank you for taking the time to read this submission.

¹⁵ (TNCP, unk.)

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