

THE IMPORTANCE OF FREE PLAY

One of the major changes in education in the past twenty years has been the transformation of the preschool and kindergarten rooms from a child's joyful creative play area into a mini-first grade rooms full of lessons and worksheets. Some government agencies around the world have even ruled that this is mandatory for the young child and will help the child in his/her academic work and in his/her growth and development in general. In the 90s early education was so popular it was even brought into the "baby realm" in the form of Baby Einstein videos and black and white themed toys designed to stimulate the baby. However, the myth of "early education" is being challenged more and more frequently. Ironically it was Einstein who said, "If you want a child to be intelligent – tell him fairytales. If you want him to be more intelligent, tell him more fairytales."

One researcher, David Elkind, even wrote an entire book on the subject. In his book, *The Hurried Child*, Elkind, child psychologist and professor at Tufts University, discusses the problem of stress that he find in children who come to him for treatment. He points out that, in the great rush to bring children into academic work, we have ceased to ask if children are inwardly ready for such concentrated, intellectually-oriented work.

The clearest example of such research which has come to our attention is a major study undertaken in Germany comparing 100 public school classes for five year olds. Fifty of them had only play in their program and the other 50 had academics and play together. The children entered first grade when they were six, and the study surveyed their progress until they were ten. The first year there was little difference to be seen. By the time the children were ten, however, those who had been allowed to play when they were five surpassed their schoolmates in every area measured. One can imagine how startling these results were to the state educators.

The basic reason that children are not ready for early education is because they are not physically, emotionally and spiritually ready. They may be ready in one of those areas – but not all of them. A child has natural developmental stages. When we interfere with this process by starting children on early academic subjects and methods of learning, their imagination may not fully develop and imagination is the basis of all intelligence.

When we follow the natural rhythms of the child they are better able to grasp and retain information they are given and the educational experience becomes a natural flow of their life. When we impose and outside or unnatural rhythm on the child education can become a challenge and/or a task for the teacher and child.