Director’s Corner: Exploring Games

While studying Pittsburgh this month, I suspect that we’ll be seeing lots of black & gold, despite the fact that neither the Pirates nor the Steelers had winning seasons. We can still root for the Penguins! Though the color scheme for our city’s professional sports teams originated in William Pitt’s coat of arms, much of our Pittsburgh pride has to do with the games we play (or at least watch others play). For that reason, I am focusing this month’s article on the benefits of exploring games.

Game play invites children to master skills in all domains, which enhances both self-esteem and independence. Game playing fosters interaction and cooperation because many games involve direction following and turn taking. Team games involve cooperation and peer support, as well as a chance to learn sportsmanship. The more children play together, the better they understand other children’s points of view, demonstrate empathy and caring, and develop conflict resolution skills. As children interact during games, they learn communication skills to describe their play, negotiate rules, plan strategies, etc. Their vocabulary increases as they learn words for new objects and actions in a variety of games. Children’s game play provides many opportunities for strengthening cognitive skills that support discovery and exploration. Attention, observation, memory, and problem solving are enhanced as children develop and test game playing strategies. During game play, children’s physical capabilities are often challenged, which builds both small and large motor skills naturally. Increasing physical prowess builds self-esteem and enables greater independence in play, which also gives children opportunities to learn how to control themselves and their bodies so that everyone can play safely. There are even games that support the growth of artistic expression & appreciation because they involve acting, drawing, etc.

Educators and parents can support game play using the full range of teaching strategies. Of course, direct instruction is necessary for learning the basic terms and rules of play, but more of a coaching approach is useful for discussing strategy options and helping children to consider which to use when. Exploring game variations and creating novel games invites children to negotiate standards of play and perhaps adapt the rules to specific contexts or players. Even open-ended discovery has a role in strengthening children’s game play, particularly when trying strategies for pulling blocks safely out of a Jenga tower or trying different levels of force when throwing a ball. By providing children with space, opportunities, materials, and appropriate scaffolding for their game explorations, we can encourage children to experiment to find what works best and then practice to master the skills and strategies for effective game play as individuals and while working as part of a team.

During the winter months, consider the games you have available and ways you could invite children to both participate in more traditional game play and invent their own games. Matching and memory games are very easy to make from everyday materials. Marbles, dominoes, and cards can all be used in diverse ways by players of all ages, so start by teaching some of the simple, common games so that children are comfortable with the basic possibilities. Then suggest that they make their own versions of the games to play with their peers or families. If you have a safe indoor space to play with soft, small balls, such as ping pong balls or Nerf balls, children can have lots of fun exploring ways to toss them though hoops or into containers, while inventing different point systems for distance or accuracy. Through it all, emphasize playing a “good game” by trying your best, playing fair, and playing safe. That way, everyone wins!