

How Play Works--First Steps Toward School
Gillian Dowley McNamee
Erikson Institute

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In the July 2007 Harvard Educational Review, early childhood educator Vivian Paley sets out several observations of young children in pretend play scenes. One of her observations took place in a local post office while waiting in line to mail a package:

The idea that children practice their thoughts in play makes sense. It's a good argument for making certain their days are filled with play. Even a few moments of listening to them, as in the following example, shows how they practice, practice, practice.

I am in a long line of impatient customers at the post office, waiting for service at the only open counter. Two sisters, perhaps ages three and five, are seated together in a stroller, oblivious to the scene around them. Listen to the way they practice the beginnings of a mermaid story:

"Pretend we're mermaids," says the older sister. "And you didn't learn how to swim yet. Say that."

"You didn't..."

"No, you hafta say *I* didn't."

"I didn't."

"... didn't learn..."

"... didn't learn..."

"... to swim yet."

"... swim yet."

"Good. Now I say---*pretend* I say---I'll teach you how. I'll teach you how."

"Okay."

"Because pretend I'm the big mermaid sister that knows how."

"Okay, pretend."

Even in the small space provided by the stroller, the littlest mermaid manages to move her arms in rhythm with the older, as the sisters pursue their slow-paced fantasy the entire time the mother is in line. It seems as much a grammar lesson as a drama, yet there is something so intimate about this careful induction of one sister by another into the business of fantasy that I cannot look away."

Vivian Paley reminds me to look for clues about children's learning in the places where I least expect them. I was on the alert when I next visited my local postal station and I was rewarded.

When I arrived at the post office, there was one person a head of me in line. This is a small neighborhood postal station with a desk for filling in paperwork to one side and the service counter straight ahead. It is my turn; I step to the counter and hand over two packages. I next hear a very whinny voice behind me: "Ah hnnhnnhnnn." I knew this to be the crocodile tears of a young child who did not like being dragged along on morning errands. Her forced cry continued, "Ahahh annnnannn." Her mother said with impatience, "Now stop that crying. We're almost done." "Ahah annn annn ah..."

And then there was complete silence. Not a sound. Nothing more. I wanted to turn around to see what had happened but I didn't dare. It would have been too rude, too intrusive in this small space. We were strangers. I hadn't set eyes on this mother and child yet. My second package was being weighed. You could hear a pin drop. I could not imagine what had happened. I heard a slight shuffle but no words. No anger from either mother or child, no annoyance; nothing. I signed the credit card receipt, gathered my wallet and could not wait to turn around and see what had been going on behind my back.

I turned from the counter and saw in a second the reason for the turn of events. The mother behind me had a little girl holding on to one of her pant legs staring at another little girl who had come in silently with her mother. The first girl was white American and the newcomer was Chinese. The second mother was at the desk space addressing a letter. The two girls were glued to looking at one another, shyly, and shifting around in a little dance, playing what looked like a bit of peek-a-boo. One had two fingers in her mouth, both were smiling, eager. I glanced and then took my leave as if nothing unusual were happening.

What was powerful to me was how much happened behind my back. In a second, a tired and impatient very young child transformed into a child in her prime, ready to abandon in a second the wearisome and annoying details of daily tasks. In a moment, she was filled with wonder, anticipation, the heightened expectation of something new and possibly exciting about to happen.

Were the two girls playing? I don't know. What was certain was that the change in state of the first child was immediate and complete. She was like a new person. She fit Vygotsky's description of a child who was a head taller than she was a minute earlier. She grew into her best self, ready for what the opportunity would hold. And it was a peer that had that had this instantaneous effect on her. How could another two-year-old have such an effect on her? This moment does not arise when we adults (as parent or teacher) tell a child what to do as the exasperated mother tried to. I know the dilemma of this mother in the post office, as I have been there plenty of times as a parent and as teacher.

Play requires a space, even a small one, where children can step out of themselves into a new position in relation to each other (and in relation to us). School can be this place of wonder and growing taller for young children if we are willing to make room for, and even turn our back and let children have reason to relate to each other as they set the bar for their own growth. Their

growth comes in measures of conflict and resolution among kitty cats and Disney characters, princesses and bad guys, mothers and policemen.

What exchanges might these two little girls have had if they could extend their conversation in school? It might have been something about mommies and shopping and tired babies. It might have been about two mermaids. Play in school requires adults wanting to listen, to wonder, to come to the scene with the participants, and sometimes with our backs turned so that we don't trample on a good idea, or a moment of budding friendship, the beginnings of intimacy. As Vivian Paley shows us brilliantly, a curriculum of play is first and foremost a curriculum of listening. It is an opportunity in the school day for teachers to be amazed at what children are learning right in front of us, and behind us too!

Paley, V.G. (2007). Goldilocks and her sister: An anecdotal guide to the doll corner. *Harvard Educational Review*, 77 (2), 144 -151.