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Stay free: Growing and learning through play



Your Turn
Shelby Pedersen
Guest columnist

Now that school is back in session, we are back to afternoons of children pouring through our doors. They all receive a healthy snack, and the first thing they want to do is have some free time to play. That's how we start our day at ICAN - with an hour or so of free play, free choices where children can do what they want.

The power of play is a critical component of childhood development. Play creates opportunities for children to explore, connect, learn and grow.

It's difficult to find a clear-cut definition of play, but the growing consensus is that play is any activity that entails active engagement, resulting in joyful discovery. Free play and exploration provide a means to allow children to learn to solve their own problems, control their own lives, figure out what interests them and how to pursue those interests. It helps them develop their own "sense of self," promoting the social-emotional, cognitive, language and self-regulation skills that build executive function (the process of learning, rather than the content) and a pro-social brain.

Play can also be integrated into structured group activities and a learning environment. Play supports the formation of the safe, stable and nurturing relationships kids develop with caregivers.

This is incredibly important here at ICAN. Many of our youths come from unstable home environments and it is critical that our staff connect with them and make sure that they are seen as trusted, supportive roles in that child's life. Play is a great way to make those connections.

All of our staff have been trained by

Playworks, a partner organization that focuses solely on the power of play. Their games and activities are inclusive, simple and fun. Our staff facilitate games that incorporate respect and inclusion, fostering a healthy community through play.

Staff even use the "play" tools in getting the kids' attention and transitioning from one activity to another. These tools can easily be used in the home.

Simple, structured, fun instructions get youths' attention and keep them focused. An example would be "when I say 'yellow' you are going to stand up, touch your toes, turn in a circle, touch something yellow and then line up at the door." The staff member would then have the whole group repeat the "game" or "instructions" out loud. Kids become engaged in the activity, pay attention and get moving to the next activity in a fun way.

The games our staff have learned from Playworks are also a great tool out on the playground as a way to include all youths, especially the ones who are having trouble fitting in, creating an inclusive environment. ICAN kids come from many different schools, so it's an excellent way for them to get to know each other.

They are also taught how to solve their own disputes - "rock, paper, scissors" is an easy way to solve an issue quickly and on their own. It is a tool we use all the time.

Free play improves self-regulation, problem-solving and mental flexibility, which aids youngsters in their academic endeavors. Play also decreases stress, not only for kids but their parents as well. Studies have shown that the mutual joy and emotional connection parents and kids experience through play down-regulates the body's stress response.

Shelby Pedersen is CEO of ICAN: Positive Programs for Youth in Chandler.