Stay free: Growing and learning through play

By Your Turn
Shelby Pederman
Guest columnist

Now that school is back in session, we see a rush 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 enables 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, and become self-regulated learners.

Play is a key element in development, including socio-emotional, cognitive, language, and self-regulation skills. Play also builds executive function (the process of learning, rather than the content) and a pre-frontal cortex. Play can also be integrated into structured group activities and a learning environment. Play supports the formation of safe, stable and nurturing relationships.

This is incredibly important here at ICAN. Many of our youth 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 and to be respected in their safety's own time. It is a tool that we use all the time.

Free play improves self-regulation, problem-solving and mental flexibility, which aids in creating a positive environment. ICAN kids come from many different settings, and it’s an excellent way for them to get to know one another. They are taught how to solve their own problems - "work, paper, scissors" - is an easy way to solve an issue on their own. It is a tool that we use all the time.

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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 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 on the playground as a way to include all youths, especially the ones who are facing issues 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.

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

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