



THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

An Overview of Research Supporting Clonlara's Educational Approach

SUMMARY

Play is one of the most natural and universal aspects of childhood. A wide body of research suggests that it creates optimal conditions for learning and supports the development of language, gross motor, fine motor, cognitive, and social skills. As such, “play-based learning” has become a standard in early childhood education.

At Clonlara, we believe play is important for *all* ages. Our personalized, student-driven educational approach closely aligns with the key elements of play that researchers have found to be so important for healthy development and learning.

“Not enough can be said about play. It is the life’s breath of learning.”

– Pat Montgomery, *Clonlara School Founder*

PLAY INVOLVES FREEDOM AND CHOICE

Children play because they choose to play. They also choose what and how to play, and perhaps more importantly, to stop playing whenever they choose to do so. What accompanies all of this freedom is a feeling of autonomy and the sense of joy that comes with being in control of one’s own decisions.¹

We believe that the joy of play enhances the learning process. By giving students ample freedom to explore their interests through play, Clonlara empowers them to let their curiosity guide their learning. Our **Full Circle Learning Model** extends this freedom to academics by giving students a framework for deciding what topics interest them most, how they want to learn, and how to share their learning with others.

PLAY CULTIVATES INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Because play is inherently enjoyable, children are intrinsically motivated to play. They are driven to engage in play by internal factors, rather than the promise of a reward or any particular outcome. Consequently, children are motivated to overcome setbacks and persevere in the face of obstacles in order to continue their play.^{2,3,4}

Clonlara’s more than 50-year history is filled with examples of how intrinsic motivation is naturally elicited when children have the opportunity to follow their curiosity and learn about topics that they truly find interesting. By allowing our students the space to be guided by their own sense of wonder and desire for knowledge and understanding, we regularly observe them working hard to overcome roadblocks, find workarounds, and persist in their play and projects.

PLAY PROMOTES FULL ENGAGEMENT

When children play, they are fully and actively immersed in the present moment. In the field of positive psychology, this state is referred to as “flow” or being “in the zone,” and is considered one of the most fulfilling and satisfying experiences one can have. When children are in the zone, they are in their own element, perfectly at home and at ease while also actively engaged and sufficiently challenged.^{1,2,3}

“Play is the work of the child.”

– Maria Montessori

Because learning at Clonlara is more process- than outcome-oriented, our students can freely engage in play and projects that connect to their academic interests and goals, making daily learning activities more engaging and enjoyable. Thus, whether on our campus or at home, it is common to find Clonlara students fully immersed in what they are doing.

PLAY IS IMAGINATIVE, SPONTANEOUS, AND UNSCRIPTED

When playing, children are the creators, inventors, decision-makers, problem-solvers, and negotiators. They have an active, rather than a passive, role in their play. Unexpected events can take place—a block tower tumbling down or the arm twisting off of a doll—which prompt them to think on their feet and adapt to new circumstances.^{1,2,5}

Clonlara students are the drivers of their play and learning, not the passive recipients of what has been predetermined for them. Our **Full Circle Learning Model** encourages them to ask questions, seek information, experiment, create, and design their own learning experiences. With guidance from their teachers, advisors, parents, and mentors, they take on increasing responsibility for plotting their own course and navigating what turns up as they pursue their interests.

PLAY NECESSITATES ORDER AND RULES

Rules and expectations are ever-present in play, and children create the rules themselves, for example, about how blocks should be stacked or what behavior fits with different roles in imaginative play. At times, these rules are unstated, but their presence is crucial for the development of self-control. When playing, children are naturally driven to control immediate impulses in favor of following the rules and continuing to engage in play.^{1,5,6}

Clonlara encourages students to have a voice in decisions that impact their learning. On our campus, this practice extends to the development of schoolwide rules and expectations where, just as in play, our students make contributions that they feel will enhance their experience. As a result, they adhere to the established rules because they are invested in the school’s culture, feel connected to one another, and truly enjoy being part of the Clonlara community.

Sources

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