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HEADLINE: Childhood lasts forever

SUBHEADLINE: A recent symposium on the importance of play attracted renowned child development scientists and experts from the US and Thailand to demonstrate that far from being frivolous, play and the tools used to do so can have a significant impact on every aspect of a child's emotional and mental growth

BYLINE: WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

In the muffled atmosphere of a cosy baby's room, roars of laughter are breaking the silence. Baby Angelina and her mum and dad are merrily involved into a game of tickle-tickle and peekaboo. The cute dark-haired baby's giggles and cooing sounds echo daddy's somewhat silly antics.

Angelina seems enchanted by the disappearance and reappearance of her daddy's jolly face. She tries to pull his hands away from his face as if to say ``I know pretty well you're there. I can't be fooled!''

This scene is surely familiar to most Thai households, as parents of new-born babies throughout the world usually gladly and spontaneously indulge in such elementary games.

Yet to childhood development experts, these moments of playful infant-parent interaction are among the most precious and valuable things in life. Through play, an infant will gradually be able to make sense of the world _ a world still for him of ``blooming and buzzing confusion'' as eminent psychologist William James once wrote.

With this precise idea of the importance of play for young children, a crowd of some 1,000 people gathered recently in the Viphawadee Ballroom of the Central Grand Plaza Hotel. Paediatricians and health care professionals from all over the country had come at the invitation of Mead Johnson Nutritionals to attend a one-day seminar and exhibition entitled ``Enfa Smart Play _ Play can jump start baby's brain power.''

Leading educational toy companies Learning Curve and Plan Toys were also involved in the project.

Research scientist Dorothy G. Singer from the Department of Psychology at Yale University, US, and author of over 120 articles and ten books, was one of the key speakers at the symposium. The event was also attended by eminent childhood development experts such as Assoc Prof Dr Nittaya Kochaphakdee, director of the National Institute for the development of children and families, Mahidol University and Assoc Prof Jittinan Dachakub from Sukhothai University.

The seminar had the merit of stating in very straightforward terms what all parents are vaguely aware of, but generally confused about _ exactly how does a child's brain develop? The importance of play begins at the time of a baby's birth and is especially important until the age of three when, as explained Sasathorn Nasongkhla, Associate Marketing Director, Infant Nutrition of Mead Johnson. ``The child's brain is like a sponge. His windows of opportunity are all wide open.''

Through play the baby's personality will begin to take shape and reveal itself to the parents. Far from being only a way to keep the kid busy, play can significantly contribute to the overall development of the child, to his social, intellectual, physical and emotional well-being.

But for a start, the essential prerequisite for an optimal brain development is a good, even ``smart'' nutrition said Mead Johnson's Nutritional Marketing Director, Anakkawat Kowathanakung, in the first speech of the seminar.

With famous DJ Hatthaya Wongkrachang (Ple), mother of twin children as emcee, the seminar got off the ground with a regression game by Assoc Prof Soraphon Suktassanee from Thammasat University's Faculty of Law, also a well-known hypnotist trained in Japan.

Through a short session of relaxation, Assoc Prof Soraphon took the audience back in time, back to their infancy, to a time of happiness and carefreeness: ``When you were 10, happy and obstinate ... then getting younger and younger, four, two, barely able to walk and so attached to your toys. ...''

The whole gathering was then in a good mood to take up the topic of the importance of play, all dizzy with tender and faraway memories of playful moments.

Singer, a world renowned childhood expert, co-director of the Yale University Family Television Research and a research scientist in the Department of Psychology at Yale, took over with numerous scientific studies to back up her talk.

Explaining what constitutes play _ the compulsory ingredients and the many benefits _ (see sidebar), Singer went on to explain an infant's perception of colour, stressing that newborns can see the difference between brightness and darkness from birth, but not yet the differences between the primary colours, red, blue, yellow and green.

``Certainly by three months, infants do respond to colours. Toys that are black and white will be gazed at by the infant but soon, it is best to use toys that are of primary colours in order to stimulate the baby's visual capacity,'' said Singer, translated by Assoc Prof Jittanan, referring to a report by Edward Melhuish, an English psychologist.

According to the study, which examines an infant's ability to distinguish between the face of their mother and strangers, a one-month-old infant is not able to distinguish between their own mother's face and that of a stranger when gazing at them from a distance of 20 centimetres (although two-month-old infants do).

Infants at one-month, however, tend to gaze longer at dark haired adults than at light haired, leading Melhuish to conclude that ``the difference between light and dark is most important in a one-month old's visual attention to faces.''

The display of cute, multi-coloured, tactile toys was thus the heart of the matter, as Singer used them to illustrate her speech, vaunting the toy's ingenuity and efficiency in stimulating brain development.

``At birth the infant's brain is about one quarter of its adult weight. Almost all the neurons are present at birth. The brain increases in weight most substantially during the first two years of a child's life, then develops steadily between the ages of two and 10. When the child is 10 his brain has reached about 96 percent of the adult size,'' explained Singer.

``Between six months and two years, brain growth is characterised by the development of fatty protective coverings on nerve fibres [myelination]. Thus, the growth of the brain is not because of new cells forming but because of synaptic connections. These connections can continue to form virtually without limit.''

And it is precisely those synapses that educational toys target, creating stimuli for all five senses.

``Parents usually consider that their role is especially in developing and maintaining their children's EQ (emotional quotient). But they can also do a lot as far as their kid's IQ (intelligence quotient) is concerned,'' stressed Sasathorn from Mead Johnson.

To encourage and enrich a child's intelligence by stimulating their senses was an ambition shared by all at the symposium. ``Let the infant discover the different textures of different materials, let them discover cold and hot objects, a various range of sounds, various ranges of facial expressions, and so on,'' Sasathorn continued.

Sparing a thought for underprivileged, rural families, Assoc Prof Dr Nittaya, said, ``An infant below six- months-old hardly needs any toys, just the life-sized ones of mummy and daddy.'' She stressed the value of homemade toys and traditional games, made educational and enriching for a child's lexis by playing with an adult.

Assoc Prof Jittinan also praised the educational virtue of big, fat crayons and big sheets of paper, sandpits, construction blocks and so forth, and called for parents' understanding of the fact that playing, for kids is as important as studying, if not more.

``Usually the best toys are unstructured toys, such as blocks, clay and crayons, all of which leave room for a child's creativity,'' summed up Singer.

Good quality, scientifically tested educational toys are undoubtedly more expensive than run-of-the-mill fashion toys. But, as Singer emphasised, ``if parents have the money, quality, educational toys are to be favoured over others, at least once in a while.''

Television and computer screens _ increasingly prevalent as ``toys'', were also thrown into the debate at the initiative of emcee Hatthaya.

``One thing is sure, kids who are heavy users of television and computers tend to become very aggressive and generally have poor language skills. There is no doubt that the effect is very negative on children,'' said Singer, who has been conducting studies on this precise topic for the past 25 years.

``Parents should not rely on television. Kids need to explore the world, smell, touch, see new things based on an interactive relationship. Some television programmes can be educational but it is up to the parents to choose suitable programmes and act as mediator,'' she continued.

But all in all, a kid's mood should also be taken into account. Overstimulation _ trying too hard to stimulate a child's brain _ can lead to stress. As with everything, a sense of moderation is required.

THE INGREDIENTS OF PLAY

Based on the talk of Yale University's research scientist Dorothy G. Singer, listed here are the basic needs of a child to ensure an optimal play session:

1. A person is needed who inspires and sanctions the play as well as appreciates it.

2. A place _ the child's ``sacred place'' _ not necessarily fancy nor elaborate but safe and where playing is authorised.

3. Time to play, open-ended, unstructured, flexible

4. Props; simple toys, objects, pets and so on.

THE BENEFITS OF PLAY

As by-products of play sessions, a child will develop:

1. Fine motor skills and large motor skills.

2. Sharp senses.

3. The ability to express emotions; empathy, joy, anger, sadness and so on.

4. A sense of sharing, turn-taking, cooperation, feeling of harmony

5. Sequencing ability; putting things in order from small to large and enormous

6. Delay of gratification, control of impulses (if kids starts to fight over a toy, the game stops).

7. Vocabulary growth, expansion of language thanks to the help of caretaker.

8. Concentration and attention abilities are increased

9. Flexibility (a child might use his body language to mime something).

10. Role taking (the larger society can be transposed when playing games such as doctor, teacher, post office and so on).

11. Expansion of imagination and creativity.

12. Ability to tell a logical story, to produce script (with a start, a middle and an ending).

13. A sense of mastery and competence, a feeling of being good.

14. A reduction in aggressive behaviour.

IN STOCK AND AT RANDOM

Listed here are a few ideas for educational play sessions, based on Dorothy G. Singer's guide:

Sensory Awakenings _ Beginning at Birth

Imitation _ mimicking baby: Imitating in an exaggerated way the baby's lip-smacking, grunts, sighs, breathing, and gurgling noises.

Mirror play: a baby-safe mirror will satisfy baby's need to stare when you're not there. It will encourage the developing visual ability of your infant.

Peekaboo: Put your head down on baby's tummy and lift it up. Your reappearance will surprise and delight baby.

Tongue-poking: babies do imitate you if you stick out your tongue.

Water play: Help baby kick his legs as you sing and talk to him. Kicking a small floating ball or duck makes the game more fun.

Dancing: With music playing and you holding baby snug in your arms, you can move around the room gently jiggling baby's arms or legs in time to the rhythm.

Finger nibbling (be sure your hands are clean).

Birth of Exploration _ How to make interesting things last _ Three months and up:

Rattle waving: using a rattle you can encourage the baby to use his grasping reflex to hold it, shake it and watch the balls disappear and reappear

Rattle pulling: You can share the rattle game with your baby using circular rattle rings. Pull one gentle from his hands as you smile. Put it back in his hand and pull it away again, laughing each time

Discovery: fasten wrist or foot rattles on baby's wrists or feet

Bouncing: play some traditional lap games with your baby

Pulling and poking: as baby grows, a stuffed animal becomes a good pulling toy, baby can pull its limbs, poke its soft body, be dazzled by the bright colours, toss it, chew on it...

Birth of Doing _ Six months and up _ Baby becomes an active partner

Playing ball

Making music; a few pots and pans and a wooden spoon are all you need for a concert. When your infant starts to walk a ``parade'' around the house is always welcome.

Stacking: All babies love to stack objects. If you give your child plastic or paper cups of assorted sizes, soon he will be stacking one upon another, or nesting them

Pop-ups

Hide the ring; babies love to search for objects once they grasp the notion of object permanence.

Bring the toy; a family game for your walking child; with a sibling close by, you can ask your baby to bring a doll or ball to his brother, sister, daddy or mummy.

Threading: large spools or wooden beads can be used for threading.

Soft shapes: Circles, squares and triangles are the first shapes a child will learn to recognise

Colouring: Big, fat crayons and big sheets of paper can help a little artist pass the time.

Smelling shelf: Set up a shelf with different spices and let the kid discover fruits and spices textures. Put in different objects with different shapes, some smooth, some hard, some round and some square.