

Want to get your kids into college? Let them play

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houses at Harvard College.

(CNN) -- Every day where we work, we see our young students struggling with the transition from home to school. They're all wonderful kids, but some can't share easily, or listen, or follow directions.

always see that actions have consequences; a few suffer terribly from separation anxiety,

and advise. They all know how to work, but some of them haven't learned how to play.

Parents, educators, and child psychologists have long debated the value of play. Some argue that play is essential for children's social and emotional development, while others believe that structured learning is more important.

These two kinds of curricula are often pitted against one another as a zero-sum game. If

before bed.

We think it is quite the opposite.

In fact, we wonder why play is not encouraged in educational periods later in the developmental life of young people.

Why do this? One of the best predictors of school success is the ability to control impulses. Children who can control their impulse to be the center of the universe, and -- relatedly -- who can assume the perspective of another person, are better equipped to learn.

Psychologists call this the "theory of mind": the ability to recognize that our own ideas, beliefs, and

carefully constructed block castle or a 20-year-old belligerently monopolizes the class discussion on a routine basis, we might conclude that they are unaware of the feelings of others.

The beauty of a play-based curriculum is that very young children can easily learn to share and to listen to others' emotions and experiences. Skills-based curricula, on the other hand, often focus on rote learning and

can't learn meaningful in the social isolation required for such an approach.

how do these approaches look compared to a classroom. First, children in both kinds of program learn about hibernating squirrels, for example, but in the skills-based program, the child could be asked to fill out a worksheet counting (or guessing) the number of nuts in a basket and analyzing the results.

In a play-based curriculum, by contrast, a child might hear stories about squirrels and be asked why a

The child filling out the worksheet is engaged in a more one-dimensional task, but the child in the play-based program interacts meaningfully with peers, materials, and ideas.

Programs centered around constructive, teacher-impoverished play are very effective. For instance, one randomized, controlled trial had 4- and 5-year-olds engage in make-believe play with adults and found substantial and durable gains in the ability of children to show self-control and to delay gratification. Countless other studies support the association between dramatic play and self-regulation.

Through play, children learn to take turns, delay gratification, negotiate conflicts, solve problems, share goals, exercise flexibility, and think with "other people in mind." By "stepping into the shoes" of another person's shoes, imaginative play also seeds the development of empathy, a key ingredient for intellectual and social-emotional success.

The real "readiness" skills that make for an academically successful kindergartener or college student have as much to do with emotional intelligence as they do with academic preparation. Kindergartners need to know not just sight words and lower case letters, but how to search for meaning. The same is

As admissions officers at selective colleges will attest, students with perfect grades and test scores but academic achievement in college requires readiness skills that transcend mere book learning. It requires the ability to engage actively with complex ideas. In short, it requires a deep connection with the world.

For a five year-old, this connection begins and ends with the creating, questioning, imitating, dreaming, and sharing that they engage in daily. By the time they get to college, we will have decided that