

Playful Teaching Practices  
www.children-together.com  
Ezra Holland and Dr. Bill Michaelis, S.F.S.U

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# Playful Teaching Practices

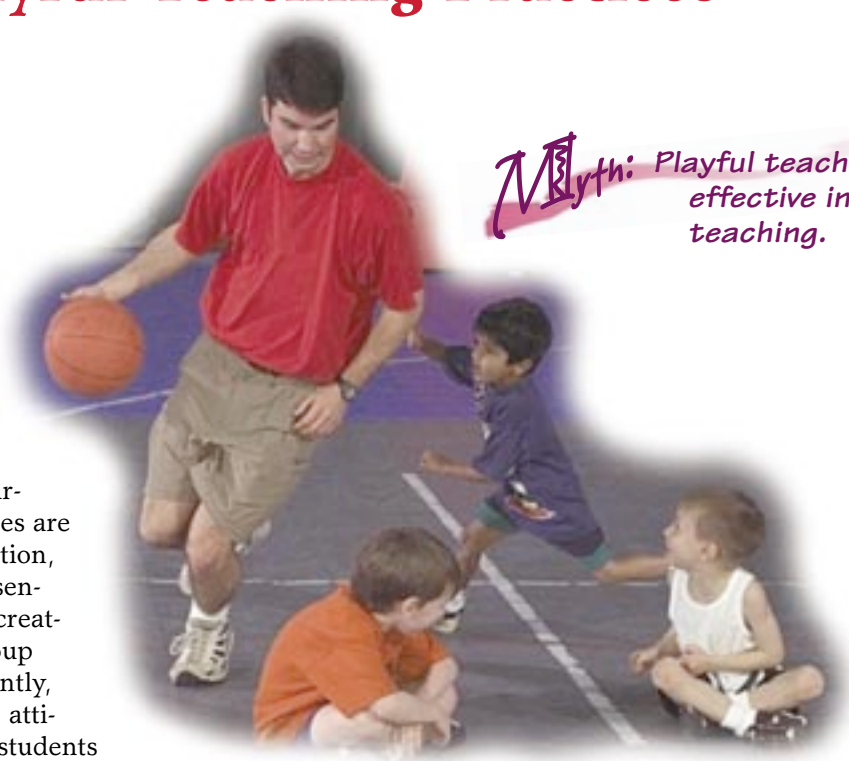
by Bill Michaelis

During this era of "drill and grill," accelerated learning, overdrive consumer lifestyles, excessive testing, and a great decrease of play in the early childhood education curriculum, playful teaching practices are sorely needed. In physical education, playful teaching practices are essential to relationship building and creating *connections* for successful group dynamics. Perhaps most importantly, playful teachers develop positive attitudes in their students and help students understand that learning can be fun and joyful. The African American poet, Nikki Giovanni, would remind us it is important not to postpone joy. If physically active learning experiences are less than joyful, physical educators may continue to find their students developing stronger preferences for less healthful *fun* activities hyper-marketed by a consumer culture. In short, we do not want children asking for super-sized video games!

## Defining Success

How do we implement playful teaching practices and become more playful teachers? The answer may lie in the way we define *success* in the gymnasium. Is *success* looked at as student skill development, improved performance, positive attitude, increased effort, student creativity, expressiveness, individuality, group cohesiveness, empathy, or group cooperation? Obviously, our personal definition of success shapes our teaching practices and our menu (curriculum) as well as how it is structured and delivered. Is it *spicy* or *flexible*? Does it accommodate a variety of learning styles, emphasize small group collaboration, and meet the needs of both the late developer and the

**"It takes such a long time to grow young and I'm only now just getting the hang of it."  
—Picasso (at 80)**



**Myth:** Playful teachers are not effective in their teaching.

superstar student? To implement playful teaching practices, teachers must first decide what they emphasize most and then assess the level of joy students feel at the end of a typical lesson.

## The Way We Lead

Having defined success, teachers might then consider playful teaching practices that compliment this goal. Teachers who define success as *increased skill development* no longer stress simply the skills of basketball, for example. Rather, equal emphasis is placed on creating an emotionally positive atmosphere while teaching basketball skills. This is done through facilitation, that is, the *way we lead*. In fact, the word facilitation literally means *to make easy*. This does not imply play facilitators necessarily make things simple and non-challenging. On the contrary, they use a variety of techniques and practices that make it easier for participants to get into a playful mood and atmosphere. Bateson reminds

us that *playfulness* is a metacommunication system, and there are many ways to communicate a message of play in our teaching (Michaelis, 1991).

Resources listed herein represent efforts to compile hundreds of practical playful practices. For example, how do we generate enthusiasm? One possibility is to tell a good joke, or even a bad one. Enthusiasm is a *fundamental* of successful playful leaders, and the word enthusiasm literally translates into *sharing the spirit within you*. Having squads develop team names and team cheers are ways to generate enthusiasm. The teacher can also establish positive, playful class rituals like standing ovations from classmates for work well done, playing safely, or helping a fellow student (Michaelis & O'Connell, 2004). A colleague of mine uses a *yeah* ritual with his groups (e.g., loud *yeahs* and quieter *yeahs* accompanied by low- and high-fives, respectively).

Another *fundamental* play practice is to make things safe, not just physically, but emotionally. Creating a psychological safety zone is essential for a playful atmosphere. Teachers can do this by a technique called *side coaching* (e.g., "Give it your best shot!") or creating pledges with the students (e.g., "Raise your right hand and repeat after me . . . I don't have to be perfect, even though sometimes I am"). Psychological safety is also enhanced when teachers use cooperative games that do away with elimination and encourage inclusive problem solving.

Even in competitive settings, shorter games (e.g., 3-point games in balloon volleyball) allow students to *play again* and avoid *slaughters*. As another example, use a time limit in Frisbee Baseball such as *5 outs* or *5 min*, whichever occurs first, to keep the game moving. This gives players additional opportunities to have a turn *at bat*.

A third critical play practice is to *warm kids up*, but not just physically. It is important to create connections between peers. General icebreakers, mixers, name games, and group builders are essential to getting students laughing. Consider partnering techniques such as *double high five partners*, where players slap high-fives five times while saying the other person's name five times. Another practice includes having players perform cooperative stretches and exercises, such as having one player jog around a partner who is standing at attention.

In like manner, another playful practice is deciding how best to focus attention or start your class (i.e., With inspiration? laughter? perspiration? imagination?). If you are a teacher who continually uses a whistle, clipboard, and megaphone along with a striped shirt to prove you are in authority, you are probably relying too little on your natural playfulness, energy, and personal power to help students focus. There are numerous playful routines and rituals a teacher can create. For example, sing out "Da, Da, Da, Dat, Dat Dat" to prompt a student response of, "Dat, Dat" (while clapping and stomping their feet). Or, count down "5,4,3,2,1," and make a buzzer sound at the end (like a basketball buzzer). Or, use the "laughing handkerchief technique;" children laugh when a red hanky is tossed in the air and become silent when it hits the ground.

## Building and Forming Groups

There are countless age-appropriate group-building and grouping techniques that can be used throughout the year. Use a variety of cooperative adventure activities, problem solving, and initiative activities to balance and enhance competitive units as well as to develop fun, pro-social skills. An example of group building is "Tarp Turnover." Six to ten children stand on a 6' x 9' tarp and attempt to turn it over so the top is on the bottom and the bottom is on the top. Players can't step off the tarp, but they can use their hands. When forming teams or grouping, many teachers divide groups by birthdays (first six months, second six months) or first names (first vs. second half of the alphabet). A more playful approach includes playing "Ducks and Cows." Whisper the name of the animal in each student's ear. They have to find their herd (sometimes with eyes closed). Another strategy is to have students select partners and say goodbye (one partner is on one team, one is on the other).

## How Playful Are You?

To assess the playfulness of a lesson, teachers might ask the following questions:

1. How are minor disputes resolved? Using "Rock Paper Scissors" or flipping a coin allows students to quickly get back to *playing*.
2. How are transitions between activities made? Give children a reasonable time limit and specific task to accomplish (e.g., "In two minutes, you should be seated in circles of ten and ready to sing your favorite advertising jingle").
3. What kind of language is used most often when teaching or coaching? Is it more process or product oriented ("The goal is to go as far as you can" vs. "You **must** get to the other side," respectively).
4. How are activities adapted and/or invented to balance the perceived challenge of the activity? (i.e., reasonable opportunity for success / fun, yet challenging / in *flow* versus bored or anxious).
5. How are students empowered? Do they assist in game inventions or changing rules? Is leadership rotated so each child gets an opportunity for a high visibility role?
6. How are classes or units ended? Fun closing rituals or games are a great way to tie together positive emotional experiences. For example, try a lap game or "Magic Circle". Students place their hands on each other's shoulders and shuffle, sliding to the right. Any player, after saying "Stop" has an opportunity to make a positive comment to the group or give an affirmation of something good that they observed from their classmates.

## Conclusion

Philosopher Martin Buber wrote, "Play is the exaltation of the possible." Obviously, many more playful teaching practices and experiences are possible. The practices described above can be thought of as *Micro-Play* that occurs between and around everything else done in physical education. Yet, such practices add to the *joy* of the experience (i.e., the icing on the cake, the dip on the chip, the swing of the thing).

But how can we perpetuate this mix of fun and focus, challenges and chuckles, skills and thrills, success and silliness?! Seek out resources written by play professionals (see Figure 1). Join organizations dedicated to enhancing playful teaching practices. The personal and professional benefits of using playful teaching practices are as numerous as the benefits of play itself. Benefits include stress reduction, increased creativity, and community building for both the teacher and students. When all is said and done, playful teaching practices greatly enhance an ability to carry out a mission of creating joyful learners who value the integrative physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual gifts that movement, experiential education, and physical activity have to offer. What a great opportunity for physical educators to "light candles" in a world that has more than its share of darkness, sadness, and challenge.

### References

- Michaelis, B., & O'Connell, J.M. (2004). *The game and play leader's handbook: Facilitating fun and positive interaction*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing.
- Michaelis, W. (1991). Fantasy play, creativity, and mental health. In T.L. Goodale & P.A. Witt, *Recreation and leisure: Issues in an era of change* (3rd ed., pp. 69-86). State College, PA: Venture Publishing.
- Nachmanovitch, S. (1998). *Free play—Improvisation in life and art*. Los Angeles, CA: Tarcher. ©

### Website

www.BillandEzra.com. This website details training and event services, products and resources.

### Organization

*Children Together* is an International Play Event and Leadership Training Organization. For more information, contact the author.

### Videos

Michaelis, B. (1997). How to Lead/Games. This leadership video complements *The Game and Play Leaders Handbook*. It contains a wide variety of can't-miss games, leadership hints, attention-getters, team-dividers, ways to promote physical and psychological safety, and ideas for modifying activities.

Michaelis, B. (2001) *The Best Frisbee and Balloon Games for Older School Age Kids, Teens, Adults and Families*. Includes written rules, creative leadership limits, safety tips, and follow-up resources.

Michaelis, B. & Holland, E. (2003) *The Best Cooperative Team Building Activities For All Ages and Organizations* (video/DVD). Includes variations, written rules, leadership and processing hints, and follow-up resources.

### Handbooks

Michaelis, B. & O'Connell, J. (2004) *The game and play leaders handbook: Facilitating fun and positive interaction*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing.

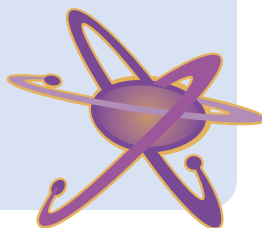
These videos and handbooks are available either from *Children Together* or BillandEzra.com.

Figure 1 Play resources.

## Toggenburg's "ARISE and Ski" program

Cindy Ward, an elementary physical education teacher in the Fabius-Pompey (NY) district for 18 years, arranges a special day for her physical education class each February. The entire fifth grade spends a day exercising on the slopes at Toggenburg Ski Center in Fabius. 75-90 students participate each year and anywhere from 30-50 volunteers help supervise skiing and instruction. One winter, the program made it possible for a student who utilizes a walker and wheelchair to participate with her classmates. A volunteer used a fiberglass bucket seat secured to two skis to control the student from behind with two straps. The young lady had a fabulous day, as did her classmates.

Source: <http://www.pelinks4u.org>



## Running Program for Interdisciplinary Learning

Fairhope Elementary School in Alabama started a running program where students run/jog/walk around a quarter mile track. Each lap is logged, and mileage for each student, each class, and the entire school is calculated. Various bays across America are chosen as destinations for the students. When each bay is reached, the school library features several books about that bay. A large map of the United States is hung in the lobby that displays the amount of miles that the school has run as well as a graph of the miles run. Individually, when a student completes 10 miles (s)he is awarded with a foot sticker. Each additional 10 miles earns a greater reward. This program is a great way for all grade levels to incorporate running and walking, reading, geography, mapping skills, goal setting, and mathematics.

Source: <http://www.pelinks4u.org>



# The World of Play: Resources and Websites to Enhance Your Curriculum

by Sharon Schneider

*Myth:* There are no resources for teachers interested in learning more about play.

Children and adults alike are overwhelmed with stresses of everyday life. As educators, we feel the pressures of helping each of our students reach their potential, attain national benchmarks, and excel in standardized tests. As adults, we have a responsibility to ensure that children still have time in their young lives to just be children. The world of play can provide a wealth of possibilities to spark children's imagination and creativity. These sites can help assist children in learning through fun and play while adding a smile to each of our days. Many organizations are ready to share their expertise to help you expand your knowledge. Please take the time to peruse these websites. Most provide additional links and resources to further investigate. Happy surfing!

### MUSEUMS

[www.strongmuseum.org](http://www.strongmuseum.org) National Museum of Play/Strong Museum in Rochester, NY: Only museum in the world devoted to the study of play focusing on American Culture. The National Toy Hall of Fame is also housed here.

[www.nationalyoyo.org/museum/index.htm](http://www.nationalyoyo.org/museum/index.htm) National Yo-Yo Museum: The world's largest public display of yo-yos including Big Yo, the 256 pound working wooden yo-yo.

[www.museum.vic.gov.au/playfolklore](http://www.museum.vic.gov.au/playfolklore) Play and Folklore: Part of Museum Victoria, Australia. Forum for discussion of childhood and children's culture. Provides publications and research on topics including games, songs, riddles.

### TOYS

[www.childrensplanet.com](http://www.childrensplanet.com) Children's Planet: Original books, toys, dolls, furniture from 1870-1970.

[www.funsci.com/fun3\\_en/toys/toys.htm](http://www.funsci.com/fun3_en/toys/toys.htm) Fun Science Gallery: Historic games, toys, how to make your own, drawings, play. Includes other countries.

[www.playthingspast.com](http://www.playthingspast.com) Playthings Past: Carries a diverse line of classic toys, games, collectibles.

### INSTITUTES

[www.instituteforplay.com](http://www.instituteforplay.com) The Institute for Play: Information, resources, and creators of a mini-series on play shown on PBS Television.

### ORGANIZATIONS/ASSOCIATIONS

#### United States:

[www.ipausa.org](http://www.ipausa.org) American Association for the Child's Right to Play (IPA/USA): American affiliate to IPA. Promotes, preserves, and protects child's right to play. Advocates and provides resources in recess, after school issues, special needs populations, playground design, play days and more.

[www.kaboom.org](http://www.kaboom.org) Kaboom!: Works closely with businesses, organizations, and communities to join together to build much needed, safe, and accessible playgrounds.

[www.playgroundsafety.org](http://www.playgroundsafety.org) National Association for Playground Safety (NPPS): Serves as a public resource for the latest in information on playground safety and injury prevention.

[www.playingforkeeps.org/](http://www.playingforkeeps.org/) Playing for Keeps: Helps bridge the gap between what researchers have learned about play and what parents and professionals who impact children's lives need to know.

[www.csuchico.edu/phed/tasp](http://www.csuchico.edu/phed/tasp) The Association for the Study of Play (TASP): Promotes research on the study of play; disseminates information through publications and conferences.

[www.freechild.org](http://www.freechild.org) The Freechild Project: Resource and advocacy group promoting young people and social change. Educator link with downloadable cooperative games booklet.

[www.lionlamb.org](http://www.lionlamb.org) The Lion and Lamb Project: An advocate for preventing violence in children's entertainment and toys. Provides Parent Action Kit.

[www.toy-tma.org](http://www.toy-tma.org) Toy Industry Association (TIA) includes Toys Industry Foundation (TIF): National manufacturers group includes extensive information on safety, play, publications, resources, toy review, and parent guides.

[www.truceteachers.org](http://www.truceteachers.org) TRUCE (Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment): National group of educators concerned with violent play and how it affects children in the classroom. Excellent downloadable Toy Action Guide filled with ideas for safe, non-violent play.

<http://usatla.deltacollege.org> USA Toy Library Association (USA-TLA): National network to make quality toys and play opportunities available by using a system of toy libraries.

[www.worldplay.org](http://www.worldplay.org) WorldPlay: Educating children about worldwide cultures, traditions, and lifestyles through handmade toys created by children.

#### International Organizations/Associations:

[www.ipaworld.org](http://www.ipaworld.org) International Play Association (IPA): Parent organization with nearly 50 national affiliates supporting Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; Promotes play as a fundamental human right.

[www.playboard.org](http://www.playboard.org) PlayBoard Northern Ireland: Lead agency for children's play in Northern Ireland.

[www.playright.org.hk](http://www.playright.org.hk) PlayRight: This Hong Kong organization offers a wide range of play services and programs.

[www.playscotland.org/](http://www.playscotland.org/) Play Scotland: Scotland's national organization for children's play.

#### PLAY ACTIVITIES AND GAMES

[www.123child.com](http://www.123child.com) The Activity Place: Over 2,000 activity ideas for those who work with young children.

[www.birthdaypartyideas.com](http://www.birthdaypartyideas.com) Birthday Party Ideas: Themed party ideas, props, and activities for all ages.

[www.pagat.com](http://www.pagat.com) Card Games: Rules and information about card and tile games from all parts of the world.

<http://www.cloudgazing.com> Cloud Gazing: A how-to guide to cloud gazing. Includes incredible photos of what our imaginations help us see.

[www.puzzlemaker.com/index.html](http://www.puzzlemaker.com/index.html) Discovery Channel School: Create your own online puzzles. Site includes guides, vocabulary lists, clip art, and more.

[www.earlychildhoodlinks.com/teachers](http://www.earlychildhoodlinks.com/teachers) Early Childhood Links: Superb resource for games, themes,

and activities for those who work with young children.

[www.familytlc.net](http://www.familytlc.net) Family TLC: Comprehensive listing of activities, games, sports, crafts, science, and articles geared toward infants through teens.

[www.funattic.com](http://www.funattic.com) Fun-Attic, Inc.: Extensive game list including products and adaptations for special needs populations.

[www.funandgames.org](http://www.funandgames.org) Fun and Games.org: A UK-based site providing resources, games, activities and ideas for all age levels.

[www.gameskidsplay.net](http://www.gameskidsplay.net) Games Kids Play: Playground games, jump rope rhymes, international games, historic implications.

[www.goanimal.com](http://www.goanimal.com) GoAnimal: Playful, primal and practical approach to health and physical conditioning.

<http://legendsandlore.com/puppet-resource.html> Legends & Lore, Inc.: Puppet resource center for props and play. Shares puppet tips, tricks, and stories.

[www.streetplay.com](http://www.streetplay.com) Streetplay.com: Games, photos, stories of street play throughout the world.

[www.teachingideas.co.uk/pe/contents.htm](http://www.teachingideas.co.uk/pe/contents.htm) Teaching Ideas for Primary Teachers: Great games for those who want to integrate physical education with other subject areas.

[www.bubbles.org](http://www.bubbles.org) The Bubblesphere: Everything you want to know about bubbles, including history, games, and recipes for bubble solutions.

#### PLAY LEADER TRAINING

[www.billandezra.com](http://www.billandezra.com) Bill and Ezra: Identifies world known play educators providing innovative techniques, workshops, keynotes, resources.

#### PLAYGROUND EQUIPMENT AND MORE . . .

[www.peacefulplaygrounds.com](http://www.peacefulplaygrounds.com) Peaceful Playgrounds: Offers elementary school playground program, designs, equipment, and workshops.

<http://www.earthplay.net> Planet Earth Playscapes: Unique, individually designed outdoor play and learning environments for children.

[www.cpsc.gov/cpsc/pub/pubs/playpubs.html](http://www.cpsc.gov/cpsc/pub/pubs/playpubs.html) United States Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC): Downloadable handbooks for playground safety.

#### PLAYWORK

[www.playeducation.com/](http://www.playeducation.com/) PlayEducation: Play and playwork publications, training, consultations, workshops, and research.

#### PRODUCT SOURCES AND INFORMATION

[www.drtoy.com](http://www.drtoy.com) Dr. Toy: All aspects of toy information including reviews, history, articles, safety tips.

[www.newitts.com](http://www.newitts.com) Newitts: Extensive list of sports equipment, toys and games from the UK.

[www.toyhotline.org](http://www.toyhotline.org) Toy Safety Hotline sponsored by the Toy Industry Association, Inc.: Everything you need to know from the toy industry about safety regarding toys and play.

## PUBLICATIONS

<http://www.arunet.co.uk/fairplay/pubs.htm>  
Fair Play for Children: *PlayAction* journal and guides contain information on current play issues, policy, safety, and play environments.

[www.schoolagenotes.com](http://www.schoolagenotes.com) School-Age Notes: Resource for latest books and information for after school programs. Ideas for curriculum, play, multicultural, and conflict resolution.

## SPECIAL NEEDS POPULATION

<http://letsplay.buffalo.edu/products/> Let's Play!

Projects. University of Buffalo, Center for Assistive Technology: Various projects provide families with strategies and ideas to promote play.

<http://cosmos.ot.buffalo.edu/letsplay/PLAY/playresources.pdf> List of play resources for children with special needs.

[www.lekotek.org/](http://www.lekotek.org/) National Lekotek Center: Helping children with special needs through toys and play.

[www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/humandev/disas4.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/humandev/disas4.html) NC State University, A&T State University, Cooperative Extension Benefits of Play in Children: Age Specific Interventions. *Beyond Play* by Karen DeBord and Nick Amann. Practical information surrounding the importance of play in the lives of children. Discusses various aspects of play and play therapy.

<http://tfhusa.com> TFH (USA) Ltd.: Multi-sensory environments, products, and ideas for special education experts. ©



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