

STIMULATING YOUNG MINDS

MEERA MURUGESAN learns the advantages of learning through play.

PICTURE this. Your child comes home from pre-school and when you ask him what he did, he gleefully tells you he played in the mud with friends or chased butterflies in the garden.

Often, such a response would worry Malaysian parents. Their first thought would be that the school isn't teaching what it's supposed to or that they are paying fees for their children to play.

For many Malaysian parents, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) means a preparatory programme for Standard One, where children are taught to read, write and do arithmetic.

The fear of having a child who may not excel academically or doesn't perform like his peers has seen many parents pushing their offspring to acquire skills they may not be ready for.

But ECEC is actually about influencing the hearts, minds and spirits of children in a positive way and play is an important component in achieving this said Lorna Long, an ECEC expert from Australia and one of the speakers at the recent International ECEC Conference in Kuala Lumpur.

Long explained that through play, children learn to express ideas, engage in exploration, imagination and experimentation and it's play that promotes flexibility in thinking and fosters language and social abilities in them.

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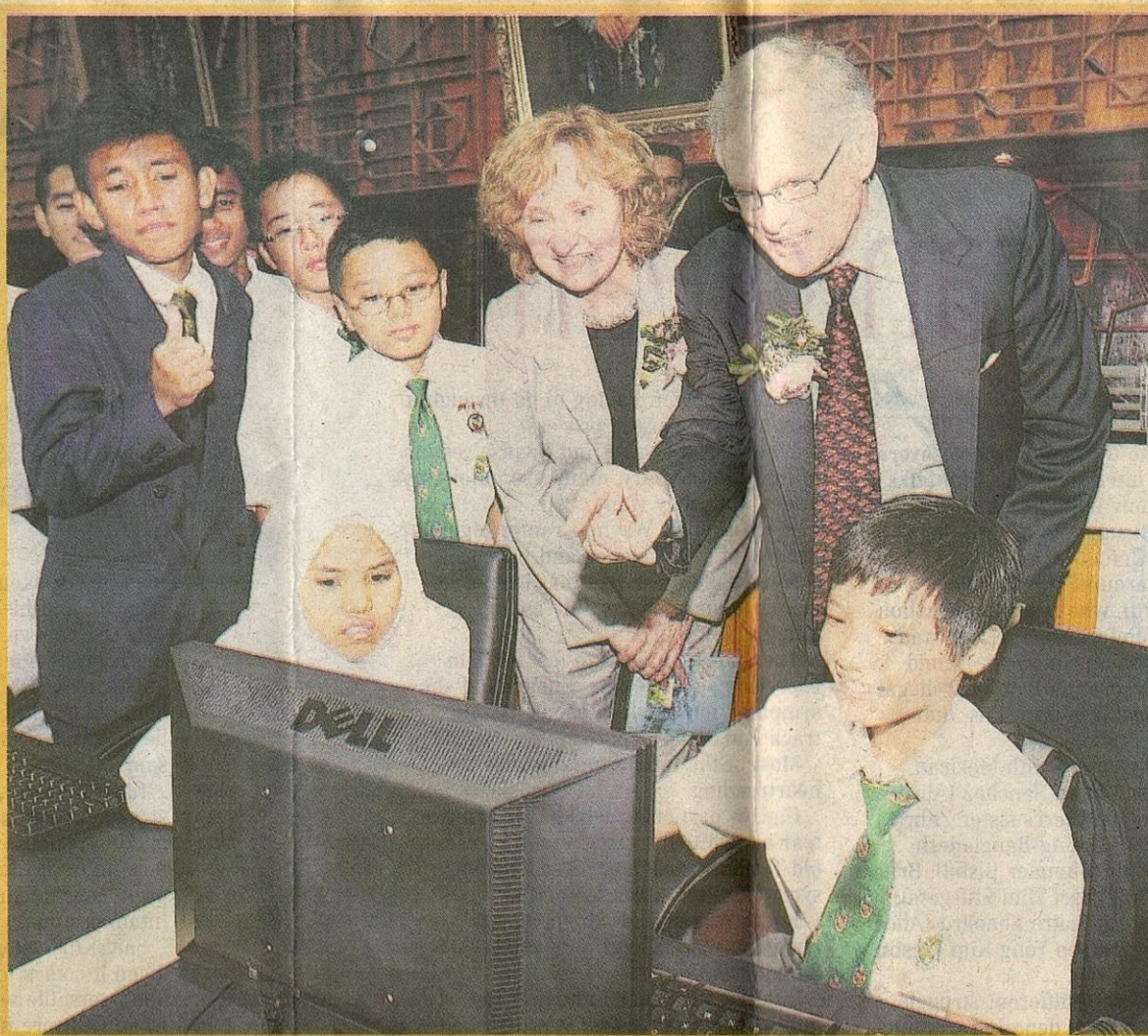
play that children learn new skills and symbolically represent their world."

Children not only gain great joy from play but they learn concepts such as sharing and caring and getting along with others, attributes they would need as adults and it's important that these skills be nurtured early, said Long.

As children investigate and explore their surroundings through play, nature is one of the best "teachers" in this respect.



Children learn about caring and sharing and other social skills through play.



"It's not an environment where everything matches or is new and shiny but one that is filled with unlimited opportunities for discovery."

Long said parents tend to be influenced by the media and friends into thinking that children must acquire certain skills by a certain age.

While there will always be some who learn faster than others, it's no indication that they will be successful later in life.

For example, contrary to what people assume, there is no evidence to suggest that teaching a child to read early has any long term benefits for that child, said Long.

It doesn't make children any more academically inclined and neither is it an indication of future success. Similarly, formal assessment and homework have very little place in ECEC.

Long said what research does show is that children need good oral language and vocalisation skills, in terms of talking and conversing, and they need to be socially and emotionally secure.

Children are much more likely to do well later if they are socially and emotionally well adjusted.

Even with gifted children, although their cognitive skills are advanced, quite often their social and emotional skills are delayed and they can't cope because they don't have the social and emotional skills to match their cognitive development.



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...ors and engaging with nature allow children to explore and discover.

Long said research clearly indicates the benefits of encouraging children to engage with nature.

Those who interact with nature regularly are also less likely to have health issues such as asthma and allergies.

For teachers, this can be as simple as allowing children free play time outdoors or starting a small garden in the pre-school and helping children plant and tend their own vegetables.

Long said an ECEC setting must be one that's designed to accommodate young children and stimulate their senses in every way, and this setting can be a pre-school or kindergarten or even a park or garden. It doesn't necessarily have to be a formal setting.

It is any environment that allows children to explore and learn while feeling safe and nurtured at the same time.

development.
It is the responsibility of teachers to explain to parents the benefits of learning through play and the training teachers receive should equip them to do this effectively, said Swati Poppat, an ECEC expert from India.

"Play is the work of childhood but how many teachers can properly explain the benefits of free play to parents?" asked Swati.

More often than not, they simply tell parents it's necessary because children like freedom and parents are not convinced.

As a result, parents often feel they can't trust pre-schools or that they are not getting their money's worth and send their children for additional tutoring sessions which unnecessarily burden young minds.

Swati said teachers should be able to explain the specific benefits and skills which children will acquire through free play which are already well documented.

Engaging parents in the whole ECEC process is also crucial but often, teachers either talk down to parents or forget to listen to them when in fact even an uneducated mother is still the person who knows her child best.

"I always tell trainee teachers that the more aggressive the parent, the bigger the challenge, but by the end of the year, that parent should be in love with them."

■ The International ECEC Conference was organised by the National PERMATA division, Sultan Idris Education University, the National Association of Early Childhood Care and Education of Malaysia and UNICEF.

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