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November 30, 2009

For Immediate Release

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Need for Fantasy Play in Kindergarten Ignored by Policymakers According to Renowned Early Childhood Education Researcher Interviewed in *American Journal of Play*[®]

ROCHESTER, NY—Policymakers continue to ignore evidence that young children need more time for fantasy play in the classroom says renowned early childhood teacher, storyteller, and writer Vivian Gussin Paley in an interview appearing in the latest issue of the *American Journal of Play* (a scholarly journal from Strong National Museum of Play[®] in Rochester, New York). To the students' detriment, she says, the current classroom emphasis is weighted too heavily on curriculum-based learning.

Paley's widely-acclaimed books, based largely on her analysis of audio-taped classroom observations of thousands of students at play, support her conclusion that free, unstructured, imaginative play provides the foundation of a young child's social and educational growth. Her thirteenth book, *The Boy on the Beach: Building Community through Play*, forthcoming in 2010, further elaborates on and supports this theme. A teacher for thirty-seven years, mainly at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, Paley has received numerous honors and awards including a MacArthur Foundation ("Genius") Fellows award for her work with young children.

"Once kindergartners could crawl under tables and between chairs meowing and woofing in secret communication, and they weren't considered too babyish and told to stop," begins Paley. "Pretend you're a lost kitty and then you meet a puppy" could safely follow, and there would be time to flesh out character and plot. Those days are fast disappearing."

While kindergarten teachers know the cost of cutting down free playtime, Paley says that few policymakers are listening. The pressure is on teachers to impose phonics, math, reading, writing and other tasks and set play aside. However, rather than being a waste of time, says Paley, play "is, in fact, a complex occupation, requiring practice in dialogue, exposition, detailed imagery, social engineering, literary allusion, and abstract thinking. . . . Kindergarten children have been arbitrarily reclassified as pseudo-first graders, and, in the preschools, there is pressure to prepare children for kindergarten standards. No matter how we look at it, young children are being deprived of at least two years of spontaneous, imaginative play."

Fantasy play helps young children get their minds around complex issues, to ask "what if" questions, and to see the larger picture. "If a little girl is asked for example, how do you like your new

baby brother? It is hard for her to imagine what the question means and what answer she ought to give in response. However, if she transposes the question into ‘How does Goldilocks feel about Baby Bear?’ she can imagine an entire scenario and even involve her playmates in a consideration of various aspects of the issues concerning big sisters and little siblings.”

The absence of imaginative play in a classroom has still other negative ramifications: “For some children, the opportunity to spend part of the school days as a kitty, for example, can alleviate problems as loneliness, transition from home, awkwardness with others, pathways to a friend, and the necessity of belonging to a group.”

Play isn’t babyish or a waste of time, it “can create deeper connections to a classroom community than a teacher-initiated phonics lesson can possibly achieve. . . .The would-be kitten, puppy, wolf, or baby bunny—or superhero or monster—who cannot reach out in the roles of their choice and be guided by the dramatic moment at hand, may become silent, or restless, or aggressive and sad. For healthy children, fantasy play is a necessity.”

Paley encourages beginning teachers to keep journals and write down their classroom observations, just as she herself did for many years. The classroom is a busy place with dozens of people clamoring for a teacher’s attention. Conversations are seldom remembered if not written down. The act of writing itself helps a teacher to explain the classroom predicament and suggests new approaches for the following day.

“There is a well-known cliché that tells us to ‘use it or lose it,’” says Paley. “This warning goes too far, perhaps, if applied to the limitations placed upon the free, imaginative play of young children, because such a distinguishing characteristic as play in molding the human personality can’t be so easily shut down.

“We must take care, however, that the current academic expectations arbitrarily placed on our children do not produce less-creative and less-happy students in our culture. It is not too late to reexamine our curriculum in the early-childhood classroom and reset the clock to an earlier time, ‘when play was king and early childhood was its domain.’”

Most importantly, she concludes, “it is in play where we learn best to be kind to others. . . .to recognize another person’s pain, for we can identify with all the feelings and issues presented by our make-believe characters. “‘Pretend there is a lonely puppy, and then a friendly kitten comes along’ begins a scenario that is adaptable grade by grade as we attempt to create a just society.”

About the *American Journal of Play* (a publication of Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York): Peer-reviewed and written in a clear, straightforward style, the *American Journal of Play* is the first interdisciplinary journal dedicated solely to the study of play. Providing thought-provoking content from some of the most prominent national researchers and writers in the field, each issue is filled with articles, essays interviews, and book reviews that explore the critical role of play in learning and human development. To view the most current issue’s table of contents, visit: www.americanjournalofplay.org

About Strong National Museum of Play: Home to the Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play, Strong National Museum of Play houses the world’s most comprehensive collection of dolls, toys, games, and play-related artifacts and is the only collections-based museum anywhere devoted solely to the critical role of play in learning and human development and the ways in which play illuminates American cultural history. The museum is also home to the National Toy Hall of Fame®, the National Center for the History of Electronic Games™, and dynamic, innovative exhibitions combining artifacts and interactivity. For more information, visit www.museumofplay.org.