Kids, Carpentry, and the Preschool Classroom

by Susan Anderson and James L. Hoot

A great deal of attention has been given over the past few years to the educational value of play in the lives of very young children (Glickman 1979, Pellegrini 1980, Yawkey & Fox 1981, Hoot, 1984). Play has been shown to serve as an indispensible medium for supporting the cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development of children. Where play does exist, it is generally found in the housekeeping, block, and sand/water play areas. Yet, many classrooms overlook one of the most developmentally appropriate and enjoyable play media of all — woodworking.

Why No Woodworking?

There are numerous reasons for the absence of woodworking activities. Many teachers find the noise created by pounding and sawing objectionable. Some are concerned about sawdust and woodshaving messes which result. Others indicate that woodworking presents unnecessary safety dangers. A final seldom-voiced, yet very important reason for not having woodworking in the classroom is a lack of experience with woodworking by females who compose 93.7 percent of child care teachers (Roup, Travers, & Goodrich 1979). Where woodworking does exist, comments such as “girls play in housekeeping; boys play in woodworking” attest to the stereotype that woodworking is not appropriate for females. Regardless of reasons for the lack of woodworking in centers for very young children, it remains one of the most liked, most potentially educational, yet most neglected areas of play in preschool classrooms.

Woodworking in the Lives of Children

Woodworking activities are often among the fondest of childhood memories. Perhaps one reason for this is that in wood play children can easily construct sturdy, three-dimensional creations which can actually be used in extending play in other areas. A bridge, for example, can easily be constructed and utilized in the block or sand areas. Similarly, an abundant supply of wooden groceries or shelves can be readily created for the housekeeping area.
The feeling of power and confidence expressed in the face of a child who has just completed a wood project is seldom equaled by students completing projects with other media. The sense of power over one’s environment, a prerequisite to all learning, is similarly expressed on the face of a three- or four-year-old who has successfully driven a nail into wood or sawed a board into two pieces with real adult tools.

Woodworking and the Early Childhood Curricula

In addition to its innate highly motivational qualities, woodworking readily lends itself to all areas of the Early Childhood Curricula (Danoff, Breitbart & Barr 1977).

SCIENCE Through woodworking students can develop numerous scientific skills such as observation and inference development about sizes, shapes, and balance. Discoveries about the physical world are especially abundant. One four-year-old boy, for example, was observed in the “Carpentry Shop” boring a hole into a piece of wood with a brace and bit. He exclaimed, “Look at all the saw dust I’m making!” When finished drilling, he removed the brace and bit, and put his finger down in the hole to brush away the wood shavings. He jerked his finger out and exclaimed, “Wow! It’s hot down there!”

MATHEMATICS Measuring, estimation of number, and concepts of size, shape, and volume are readily developed.

LANGUAGE ARTS Numerous vocabulary words about tools and their functions are developed. Children also develop vocabulary needed to describe special difficulties they may be having with woodworking materials. Vocabulary is also greatly extended through the play episodes which emerge from wood creations such as cars, spaceships, and robots.

SOCIAL STUDIES Social studies involves study of the relationship between children and their world. Woodworking readily lends itself to ecological studies. Numerous children’s books relate to forest themes involving animals and ecology. Woodworking is also a process which readily lends itself to group projects and decisions.

How to Begin

With just a little study and practice and a very small investment of time and money, a “Carpenter Shop” can be set up in a preschool classroom to encourage woodworking play. There are several excellent books to aid the beginner. The most comprehensive of these is Woodworking for Young Children by Skeen, Garner, and Cartwright (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1984). This volume is filled with practical concerns and resources to get you off to a productive start.

The attitude of the teacher is of utmost importance in a woodworking play center. It is imperative that the teacher feel comfortable using the tools so that the sense of power over the medium is transferred to students. Teachers should also be sensitive to making sure that girls are as welcome as boys in the center.

While it is desirable to have a woodworking center in each room, if circumstances do not make this possible, several teachers can combine their resources into one center in a convenient location. With this organization, teach-