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Kids learn when they're having fun

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When it comes to learning, let's not forget about fun

When adults think about "school readiness," what often springs to mind are fundamentals such as knowing the alphabet and being able to count to 10, use a crayon and cut paper with scissors. Those are important skills, to be sure. But let's not forget about fun.

Research tells us that fun is serious business for kids. Playtime helps young children learn to solve problems, get along with others, express their creativity and develop their physical dexterity and language skills. It is through play that young children experience the joy of learning.

Brain research tells us that the first years of a child's life are a time of incredible development. But in a culture when the typical child spends more and more hours of her day in front of the television or computer, we don't always remember the power of good old-fashioned play. In Richard Louv's book, "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder," he recounts a conversation he had with a fourth-grader named Paul, who told Louv he preferred to stay indoors because "that's where the electrical outlets are."

Is this what we want for the future leaders of our state?

The Washington State Department of Early Learning was created in 2006 to help ensure all children in our state realize their full potential, and to support parents as children's first and most important teachers. Part of our mission is creating a child-friendly state that supports children in growing up safe, healthy and with a love of learning. We strive to ensure our state offers plenty of safe, low-cost learning opportunities that remind adults and children alike about the importance of play.

It's why DEL this week is announcing a partnership with Washington's children's museums to support healthy child development. We are awarding grants to 13 children's museums around the state -- urban and rural, east and west of the mountains -- to help them open their doors to more children and families. Children need to have fun, regardless of their family's socioeconomic status.

In addition to inviting more families to experience the rich early learning

environment offered at children's museums, the dollars will support other projects:

- The Hands On Children's Museum in Olympia will use part of its grant to offer free admission to military families, and begin foster family and adoptive parent support groups.
- The Children's Museum of Tacoma will offer free admission days and launch a program so families can "check out" museum passes from public libraries.
- The Orcas Island Funhouse will purchase bilingual (English/Spanish) literacy materials for use at the Funhouse and to share with other early childhood care providers on Orcas Island, to support cultural compassion in the community.
- Mobius Kids in Spokane will buy a parachute, crawly mats, water table supplies and other goodies for a weekly Wee Explorers class for children ages 3 and younger.

But it takes more than state government grants to create a child-friendly state. Children's museums, playgrounds, public libraries, zoos, child care and preschool programs, their own home -- there are so many places for Washington children to learn through play. But all of us must commit to helping instill a lifelong love of learning in children.

During this week -- the International Week of the Young Child -- I encourage all Washington residents to ask themselves what they have done to help children in their lives. Have you taken a child on a walk? Have you read or sung to a child? Have you gotten down on the floor and played make-believe with a child? Have you donated your favorite children's book to a local homeless shelter?

What have you done to help a child today?

Jone Bosworth is the founding director of the Washington State Department of Early Learning. Visit [www.del.wa](http://www.del.wa.gov) <<http://www.del.wa>> .gov <<http://.gov>>

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