

# Anji Play

## The Child's Right to Play

by Joleen Voss-Rodriguez and Cheng Xueqin



Joleen Voss-Rodriguez is a professor of child development and education and the director of the Program for Accelerated College Education at Pierce College in Woodland Hills, CA. She has worked with children and families for over 30 years in early care and education, child mental health, parent education, and early intervention. She has presented on various topics in education at NAEYC and CAEYC conferences, for the U.S. Department of Education, and for educators in the United Kingdom. She is also an author for Out of the Box Training Kits offered through Exchange. Her commitment to sharing best practices in the education community led to the creation of the Facebook and Instagram pages called *The Inspired Child*.



Cheng Xueqin has traveled throughout the world advocating for children's right to play and sharing the powerful story of the development and creation of Anji Play. Early childhood educators can experience the joy of True Play firsthand through the Anji Play study tour. For more information, please visit the Anji Play website: [www.anjiplay.com](http://www.anjiplay.com)

Ms. Xueqin is the creator of the Anji Play approach, director of the Office of Pre-Primary Education, Anji County Department of Education, Zhejiang Province Member, Play and Materials Professional Committee, China National Society of Early Childhood Education. Her research includes public policy and management in pre-primary education, early childhood curricula, and play. In 2004, Ms. Xueqin was recognized by Zhejiang Province with its highest honor for her 2004 research initiative, "Rural Early Childhood Education Management and Development Strategies." In 2014, she received the highest honor for national achievement in pre-K-12 education from the Ministry of Education of China for "The Practice and Exploration of the 'Anji Play' Approach." She has presented her work to colleagues and audiences at Columbia University, MIT, Mills College, Stanford University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and other learning and play communities in the United States and globally.

A rural county in China has emerged with an inspirational story about the transformation of its early education system to one that values children's play as a fundamental right. For more than a decade, Cheng Xueqin, the regional director of early childhood education in the county district of Anji, China, has worked tirelessly to create and implement Anji Play, an open-ended, play-based early childhood education approach. The Anji Play philosophy and curriculum seeks to cultivate and explore a deeper understanding of children's play and learning. Ms. Xueqin and the educators of Anji assert, "Returning the right of self-determined play to children and communities in an environment defined by Love, Risk, Joy, Engagement, Reflection is the guiding principle of Anji Play." ([www.anjiplay.com](http://www.anjiplay.com))

The county of Anji is in the northwestern Zhejiang province, approximately three hours from Shanghai. There are 130 public early childhood centers in the county. Anji is a rural area known for its production of green and white tea and is home to one of the largest bamboo forests in China, Anji Grand National Bamboo Forest. Anji is also at the forefront of ecotourism. The local govern-

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ment has made efforts to preserve the integrity of the natural resources of the area by promoting eco-friendly agriculture.

As the regional director of Anji, Ms. Xueqin continues to lead a movement of educational change that has determined the direction of local, regional and national early childhood practice in China. Her commitment to understand children's learning and play led her to free children from desks and from their joyless classrooms that endorsed "no play" to being fully engaged in self-directed experiences Ms. Xueqin calls "true play." In Anji, the educators entrust children with the right to self-determine play. The scope and breadth of the play is entirely child-determined. The children are given abundant time, open-ended materials, and the opportunity to play and to reflect upon their



experiences. The role of the teacher is to observe, document, and analyze each child's play. The teachers meet regularly to interpret the child's developmental progress based on their observations.

In this interview, translated by Jesse Coffino, Ms. Xueqin shares her powerful journey as an educator and her remarkable success at effecting systemic change to honor the child's right to play.

### **Please explain your beliefs concerning the child's right to play.**

Play is a fundamental right and a basic need of all children, regardless of where they live or their specific circumstances. The right to play flows from the rights to the love, respect, and trust of the adults in their lives. It is the responsibility of adults, particularly educational professionals and policy makers, to promote and protect these fundamental rights. When those conditions exist, children naturally engage in the deepest forms of play: discovery and insight. Therefore, the right to play is also the right to joy, the right to love, the right to engage in deeply meaningful learning experiences, and the right to grow, learn, and develop.

### **Why do you believe that play is important in the lives of children?**

All of us experience a unique and important period in our lives that we call childhood. During this period, we have an innate urge to understand the world, ourselves, and others. Our brains are ready and set to solve and understand the new problems and relationships and qualities that we encounter in our experience. For that reason, what we describe as "true play"—play that is self-determined in an environment of love—is actually the deepest and most natural form of learning. Nothing could be more important to the lives of children than the joy, freedom, and growth that characterizes this kind of play.

### **Please share your journey from "no play" to "false play" to "true play." Can you share examples of the three phases of play that you witnessed?**

When I first began my work as head of early childhood education for Anji County in 1999, we were facing a situation that was common across China at the time; privatization of our best kindergartens coupled with underfunded, deteriorating, or non-existent schools in our rural areas. My first goal was to build an infrastructure of safe, clean, and accessible schools and school rooms throughout the rural parts of our county. Along with a core group of principals, over 10 years we expanded the number of high-quality kindergarten facilities from four to 130, and we now serve 14,000 children ages three to six on a full-time basis; close to 99 percent of children in Anji County attend public kindergartens. As we built this infrastructure, we also focused our attention on what was going to take place in these schools. For many years, the standard public kindergarten in China basically warehoused kids. Kids were forced to sit still at their desks and teachers tried to teach them reading and math. That was a state of "no play." When you walked into a classroom, you saw no joy on children's faces—a heartbreaking, but all too common, circumstance. When our teachers and principals look back on that period now, we seek forgiveness for the harm we caused.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Ministry of Education of China published guidelines that stated play should be a fundamental aspect of early childhood curricula. We understood this was the direction we needed to pursue. To this end, teachers began setting up situations for play, designing games and environments, and assigning roles and rules of play. At the time, we thought this was the best method for supporting play experiences, and teachers spent hours to create these attractive but structured play spaces. When I observed

this play, I noticed that the children were neither happy nor meaningfully engaged. For the most part, children were simply doing what was expected of them. Our most painful realization was that their play lacked joy—and the teachers, having worked so hard to set up the play—were frustrated and tired. Despite their best intentions, they had created the conditions for what we began to recognize as "false play." We saw that there is no joy in false play and, for the teachers and children, it was a relationship lacking in joy and love.

We realized that to fulfill our mission, it was necessary to cultivate a deep understanding of play that was not bound by our expectations of what happens in school or even tied to learning outcomes. We realized these limitations created the conditions of false play. We quickly realized that play is the most natural and basic of all human activities—that it is characterized by joy, risk, and freedom—and that within each of us we carry a deep knowledge of play from our own childhoods that could free us from the confines of our adult misconceptions about play. This began our journey towards true play for both children and adults.

We began a process of recalling our play. I asked myself and my family and teachers and principals in Anji to recall our deepest childhood memories of play. Common themes began to emerge: outdoor play; risky play; play with big, minimally structured materials; play that took place over extensive, uninterrupted periods of time; and self-determined play, play that was selected and organized by us, children, ourselves. Once we had a picture of what true play looked like, we began the process of making that a reality for the children in our care. We began to remove fixed play structures and thematic play. We made our environments minimally structured and open-ended. We increased natural environmental elements such as bamboo groves, streams, dirt, sand, and hills. We

introduced large, minimally structured, and open-ended materials, and we gave children extensive time to create, imagine, and solve problems in an open-ended, self-determined way.

As teachers and educators, we became students of children's play. We created systems for observing and reflecting on what happens when children are given the opportunity to engage with materials and environments in these ways. We engaged in focused and systematic observation of our children's play. We used available technology, such as smartphones and cloud sharing, to organize and reflect collectively and deeply on what we were seeing across our 130 schools and 700 teachers. Children also gave us insight into their experience and helped us understand their play from their point of view. We did this through the development of two reflective processes: play stories and play sharing, which create complementary ways for children to represent in images and words their own stories of play and allow teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the child's experience from his point of view.

We have had this system in place since 2009 and now see our schools as places of joy, engagement, and meaningful, love-filled experiences for both teachers and children. We have also seen children's development and growth increase dramatically, and we have seen this impact continue into primary school and beyond. In throwing out the utilitarian, short-sighted goals of limited

educational measures, we have claimed a space of greater, deeper learning for children, teachers, and parents alike.

### **How did parents react to the changes in the schools?**

Their initial reaction was shock, anger, and protest. They worried about time wasted on things other than learning, and they worried about safety and their children getting dirty. Grandparents, who often take care of children in China while parents work, prayed in front of our school gates, begging their grandchildren to stay inside the classroom and avoid the dangers of mud and climbing. Parents filed complaints with the government and pulled their kids out of school.

### **How did parent education play a role in promoting change in the schools of Anji?**

Parent education takes many forms in Anji. What began as a critical tool for convincing the parent to embrace our radical shift to true play has now become a vehicle that engages parents in the lives and learning of their children. Parents have become active participants in the creation and maintenance of spaces for true play and they are a key point in the ecology of early education in Anji County.

Our parent education initiatives were born out of necessity and took shape based on the realities of addressing tens of thousands of families that make up our community. In order to do that, we had to understand their concerns and needs. At the same time, we could not compromise the rights of children to true play.

Parents expect their children will be safe when they are at school and will benefit from their time there. We sought to address these two very

specific concerns by distributing our national standards for child development to every family in the county. I asked these same parents and grandparents to come to our schools, to watch their kids playing, and bring guidelines along with them. They saw bravery, compassion, responsibility, curiosity, collaboration, and intelligence, and they saw the highest expectations of their government's highest authority met. They also saw that their children were capable of self-regulation and created and protected their own safety while taking risks. We asked our parents to take part in play, allowing their children to guide them on the playground. They began to experience and understand the complexity and challenges of true play, that it requires brains and guts and heart. They saw that play is, in fact, learning.

As Anji Play continued to develop in our schools, we invited parents to be trained in interpreting, reading, and understanding their children's play. In these settings, parents become empowered as experts, and with this change in role, the parent becomes actively engaged in learning from their children, their respect for their children and teachers deepens, and they become powerful advocates for their children. When new parents enter our school system, we rely on these expert parents to work with them. It is our experience that parents are often the best resource for communicating with other parents.

We also involve parents and families in the practice of play stories. Children in Anji draw a daily story of their play. They use materials like pens, pencils, crayons, construction paper, and glue and employ marks of their choosing to narrate or describe their experiences that day. Children may also decide to dictate their story to their teacher. Children bring these stories home and their parents are encouraged to continue the practice of transcribing their child's descriptions. Through this initiative, the parent remains engaged in the daily

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play of the child, literacy and expression become one focus of a child's reflection and interactions at home, and the child creates a body of texts. These texts, which grow in length every day over the course of the child's three years in kindergarten, become another point in the ecology of Anji Play.

**What advice could you give to schools that are faced with strong opposition to play, especially from the parents?**

We sought to identify and understand the concerns and needs of the communities we serve and the larger community of which we are a part. We think of Anji Play as an ecology that connects children, teachers, parents, families, communities, and government authorities; therefore, the strategies that we used and the advice that I would give to educators facing strong opposition to play is that they should first seek to understand those concerns and needs and then address them head-on. If a parent is concerned about learning, let them see the learning that is taking place in play, and let them experience that learning themselves by inviting them to take part in play. Let them observe and reflect on what they are seeing. If they are worried about safety, show them how children who engage in risky play are actually safer, show them how their children negotiate challenges and adjust their physical bodies in play. Just as we must respect children, we also have to respect parents.

In our work we also had to overcome the concerns of teachers who were used to traditional methods of teaching. We focused on the development and empowerment of our teachers. We provided training so our teachers could become highly skilled observers. It is through this increased professional knowledge of your position vis-à-vis both children and the larger culture, that your status changes. You are a skilled expert. As you are able to communicate your knowledge of children to parents

and other educators, your status is elevated to that of an expert in the eyes of the community. This was very important to us—a critical part of the shift in attitude, both about children and the work of their teachers. To create systemic change, it was critical to address the entire ecosystem of early education.



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Addressing head-on the perception of parents of the professional role of teachers was critical to that process.

