

Thank You Ruth Washburn

By Patrick Stevens, Alumni Parent and Board Member

“Art can be anything. It doesn’t have to be a painting – it can just be an expression of your feelings.”

That’s what our eleven-year-old son told me when I asked him what he’d learned at Ruth Washburn. It surprised me, to be honest, that a fifth grader thought about it that way. But I took his response as yet more proof that our decision to send our three children to RW had been a good one.

For over 50 years now, Ruth Washburn has been teaching children – and parents – the power of play. It is a notion that has fallen out of favor in the last decade. Today the system places a strong emphasis on test scores and on pushing early academic achievement – at the expense of unstructured play time.

As a RW parent, it’s easy to look back on our past eight years with Ruth Washburn as a succession of maintenance weekends, parent-helping days, and desperate searches for auction items. But the school has had a much more significant impact on our children – and on us.

While our oldest child prepares to make the somewhat terrifying leap from elementary to middle school (terrifying for us, anyway), our youngest finished at RW last year. These milestone events have encouraged me and my wife to reflect on the influence RW has had on our children.

As we’ve watched our kids trek through elementary school, we’ve seen firsthand the emphasis placed on testing and on early academic achievement. The trend has pushed testing ever further into the younger years. The amount of the school day allotted to imaginative play continues to shrink – a recent study of kindergarten teachers showed that the average kindergartner is allowed a scant 19 minutes of free, unstructured free time a day.

That goes against what most scientists and education researchers believe is best for a child’s development. “Play at age 5 is of great importance not just to intellectual but emotional, psychological, social and spiritual development,” Edward Miller, co-author of a 2009 report by the Alliance for Childhood, a nonprofit education research and advocacy group, told the *New York Times*. Play, the article continues – especially the dramatic role-playing that RW kids love – is how kids “develop higher-level thinking, hone their language skills, and cultivate empathy.”

The good news is that the importance of play is experiencing a renaissance among scientists, psychologists and education researchers. Of course, Ruth Washburn has been putting this concept into practice for over 50 years now. And they’re good at it.

Playing nicely in the sandbox might be an old axiom about childhood interaction, but it is precisely those skills that are instrumental in helping children become successful adults. When you look at a group of 26 year-olds to determine what makes them successful in the workplace, it turns out it doesn’t matter much when they first learned to read or if they mastered multiplication tables before kindergarten.

But what does make them successful in the workplace is their ability to communicate with their peers, their ability to resolve conflict, and their ability to interact with their superiors. Those are the skills developed in the early childhood years. And play fosters that development.

In an article written for CNN, two Harvard professors emphasize the importance of play this way:

“As admissions officers at selective colleges like to say, an entire freshman class could be filled with students with perfect grades and test scores. But academic achievement in college requires readiness skills that transcend mere book learning. It requires the ability to engage actively with people and ideas. In short, it requires a deep connection with the world. For a five year-old, this connection begins and ends with the creating, questioning, imitating, dreaming, and sharing that characterize play.”

The problem of course is that this type of play is losing ground. A survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation last year found that the average child spends 7 hours 38 minutes a day in front of an electronic screen. But Ruth Washburn kids don't need that crutch. They've been taught from the very beginning to use the power of their own imaginations.

Looking back, I feel that the habits of play that our children – and their RW classmates -- formed at RW have very much stuck. I watch them role playing entire Star Wars scenes (yes, there's a "screen connection" there, but it's used as a springboard to active play). They wage outdoor water battles and construct villages in the sandbox.

RW taught these children to appreciate and use their own imaginations. Ruth Washburn gave us, as parents, an invaluable tool. To this day, we can give our kids the vague instruction, "just go play" -- and be confident that, for them, it means "go create something."

In short: Thank you, Ruth Washburn, the staff, and the parent community for enriching the lives of our children and all the children in our school's community.

Full disclosure: I am writing this article on Sunday morning – a full five days late getting it to Sukie. My six year old, who desperately wanted to play with me, is lying on the floor playing with the ipad that I chucked his way so I could finish. I'll cut him off before he hits 7 hours 38 minutes though...