In Defense of
Edutainment

The other day, while sitting in the waiting room at my dentist's office, I came across a column* that reminded me of what a bad word "edutainment" is to some people. It was by renowned educator and thought-provoker Seymour Papert (a.k.a. "The Connected Family"). He writes **"Frankly, I think it is down right immoral to trick children into learning and doing math when they think they are just playing an innocent game."** (It turns out that my dentist feels the same way. By the way, I don't recommend conversations about "ejhduhnmainmmnnet " while sitting in the dentist's chair.)

Quite a few educational psychologists share Papert's views about "edutainment" software. In fact, as a former LOGO teacher, I've been known to make similar statements. But my experiences as a parent and as a 4th grade teacher have enlightened me. My dentist and Papert argue that the only route to "authentic, lasting learning" is through "hard fun" or "when one is deeply engaged in hard and challenging activities." Papert even urges software publishers to "Forget about making games to teach children multiplication or spelling or any of those old-fashioned basic skills ... the really basic skill today is the skill of learning..."

I have to wonder, though, can't you have your cake and eat it, too? When I was in the classroom I tried my hardest to make tough concepts "edutainment". We learned about solar energy for instance, by making solar hot dog cookers, and we used to have regular reading contests and book detective scavenger hunts. And the kids loved to put their spelling words into cross-word puzzles.

I'm convinced that given some time and a quality computer, I could persuade even the most stubborn critic (my dentist, for example) that "edutainment" isn't such a bad word. I'd let him play with **I Spy**, **Orly's Draw-a-Story**, **All-Dogs Go to Heaven Activity Center**, **Reader Rabbit's Toddler**, **Math Workshop**, any of the latest **Carmen Sandiego** titles, and Edmark's new **ZAP!** to name just a few.

Some of this software is so good, in fact, that I think it's "down right immoral" if children don't have access to it! Don't get me wrong. I'm a fan of Papert and respect his view. In fact, I think programs like the new LEGO Mindstorms (on which Papert advised) have tremendous potential for impact on learning. But in times of rapid technological innovation, narrow thinking is perilous, and it doesn't do parents or teachers any good to hear someone such as Papert dismiss an entire category of software as "immoral." Instead, it is important to continually sample the latest educational software, while keeping an open pedagogical mind. That, in my opinion, is more important than flossing.

W. Buckleitner, Editor, *Children's Software Revue*

---

* *Game Developer Magazine, June 1998, page 88 (www.gdmag.com)*

...from Papert's Perspective

We thought it would be only fair to give Seymour Papert a chance to respond to our challenge. We also showed it to Idit Harel, one of Papert's former students and the president of MaMaMedia, an organization whose website and magazine provides services such as a children's guide to the Internet, and kids' web activities (www.mamamedia.com).

Seymour Papert
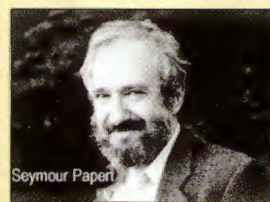
Idit Harel, Ph.D., President of MaMaMedia

Dear Warren:
I read your essay and think it is especially important to consider what Papert has to say about two key points "Honesty," and "Hard Fun." For example, Papert writes "If you teach something true, but in a dishonest way, kids will tend to distrust what they are learning. Kids need to know that they are learning what they are learning when they are learning it." Hard Fun "is a name for a fundamental principle of learning which comes from the children themselves. Finally, and most importantly, regarding your summary: " ... it is important to continually sample the latest educational software, while keeping an open pedagogical mind." During the past 16 years, I have learned that Papert has been developing his learning theory and analysis of learning environments & software for kids, NOT by focusing on "pedagogical minds," but rather by focusing, defining, understanding and inspiring the development and creation "mathematic minds." Papert's ideas about "honesty in learning and teaching," "playful learning," and "hard fun," and his "Constructionist Learning" theory in general, are all about the "art of learning," "epistemology" (origins of knowledge among learners), and about the "art of learning to learn" -- not about teaching methods, pedagogy, or efficiency of instruction.
Best Regards, Idit.

Semour Papert

Dear Warren and Idit,
I'd like to add just two points to your thoughtful interchange. RE: Warren writes "what's the harm in some of those old-fashioned basic skills, as long as they're fun and are meaningful? Can't you have your cake and eat it too? ....."
First, some of those so-called basic skills are harmful when they convey a wrong sense of what is basic knowledge ... of what mathematics is all about. They are also harmful when they support parent and teacher anxieties aroused when individual children don't achieve some set standard at some set age and especially when oppressive or deceptive measures are taken to force children into line. I agree with Warren as long as he takes seriously his language: "....As long as they are meaningful." I'll even pass on the fun part .... Much of what we do is not "fun" all the time. We do very boring things very willingly when we know they are part of a larger personally meaningful whole. But we must pay attention to the reference of the word 'they' in my quote from Warren. It must be the math ... or whatever... that is meaningful and not merely the activity in which it is embedded. Example: learning about solar energy by making a solar hot dog cooker is not hiding the fact that it is about solar energy. Solar energy *is* about using solar energy and this is what they did in the hot dog project.
Secondly, making a crossword puzzle to focus on spelling is really great if the learner does it... That is to say if it is done honestly. Sounds to me like Warren and his kids did it together consciously and openly.
S. Papert

Note: *Visit www.connectedfamily.com to learn more about Papert's work and the books.*