**Connie Playroom**

[00:00:00] **Delphine:** [00:00:00] Welcome back to the access to education podcast, where we talk about everything having to do with learning challenges and learning disabilities. On this episode, we're going to talk about playtime for our kids. No matter their ability. All kids love to play as parents, knowing what to put in that play space and how to engage your kids in play can be tricky.

There are so many options out there. So today I'm bringing an expert in, on creating, engaging and organized play spaces. Connie is a playroom consultant working in the GTA with families to transform their play spaces into something that allows for learning free plate. She brings with her 14 years of teaching experience of kindergarten to grade three and being a parent herself. She gets it. Connie, welcome to the show.

**Connie:** [00:00:48] Thanks for having me.

**Delphine:** [00:00:50] I'm excited about this conversation because I think it's applicable to everyone, anyone, all abilities, no matter what I think [00:01:00] we for those of us who have started receiving, so we're recording this in end of October, beginning of November, that the Christmas catalogs are starting to arrive.

And I don't know about you, but in my house, my five-year-old is ticking. Everything that's pink. So she just wants everything. Yeah. And knowing what to put in a playroom that is going to be engaging slightly educational and not something they'll play with for five seconds and walk away from.

Nevermind. Where do I put it? How do I store it? How do I keep it altogether? So many questions.

**Connie:** [00:01:34] Yes. This is all this stuff I love to talk about.

**Delphine:** [00:01:38] Then I'm very glad you're here right before the holiday season, so that's perfect. Okay. So let's. Talk to me a little bit more about the playroom consultant work that you do.

Cause I've been following you for a while. I'm seeing what you're doing the before and afters are awesome, but like, why did you decide to start this work?

**Connie:** [00:01:55] So my playroom consultant business is just one year old now. [00:02:00] And in general I say that I help parents create organized uncluttered playrooms that are set up in a way that engages.

Their children to be playing in a way that they're learning through play and easily playing lots and have a space that's easy to tidy. And I have this background in teaching that I apply to my playroom consultant business, and I was a teacher for 14 years with the Toronto school board. Three of those years were in grade three and it was seven years that were in kindergarten.

That is a play-based learning program. So I hadn't thought about it much myself, but I had in my job learned how kids learn through play and how to set up an environment that guides kids play and introducing materials that get them to play in a way that shade. Yeah. You have your learning centers. If it's a math center, you put out materials in a way that kids just naturally are playing and engaging in using math language or practicing, [00:03:00] sorting or counting.

And then my own girls, yeah, nine and six. And I was using things that I knew as a kindergarten teacher in our own home and keeping this space organized and tidy and people would make comments about, Oh, this place is set up so great. And I can't believe how organized and tidy you are. And just one of these things.

You don't notice what you're good at until other people are pointing it out and then really came to the idea of wanting to offer this service to families. After, in my 14th year of teaching it was the last couple of years that I really noticed my kindergarten students were, I had so many coming to school, very tired looking like they were uncomfortable and anxious during the day.

And behaviors that I did not notice so much when I started 14 years ago. And I think it's in the media too, that we're hearing more and more that kids have very structured lives and are experiencing more stress and anxiety at all ages. And in [00:04:00] younger ages than you used to see. And one of the reasons that's blamed for all this is that they're not getting as much time to play and they have very scheduled lives and my own students in a Midtown school in Toronto with families that could afford lots of wonderful, amazing extracurricular experiences there weeks we're going to school for the full day and then going to swimming lessons or karate or science lessons and all these great opportunities, but then no downtime.

And I think I really wanted parents to understand that it's wonderfully beneficial for your kids. Further all areas of development and for relaxation wellbeing, to be able to get to just. Chill out and play at home. And that you're an awesome parent just for giving them the time to do that and doing something that really helps them.

So this is all of the message that I'm trying to get [00:05:00] out there and helping parents set up a space that makes it so easy for your kids to have all that time playing at home.

**Delphine:** [00:05:09] There are so many things about that I want to talk about. And I don't even know. It's like a huge concept. It's a huge idea.

And I know it's one I struggle with as a parent, although I will say again, pandemic has forced us to stop because we can't over program. We can, they're just that we can't do the swimming lessons and the soccer and the, this and the, that, and that, like those options aren't there. And so I'm finding that the toys are coming out.

More. But again, the way I have them organized, you would probably tell me it's not the best, but there we are. So let's talk about us as parents. When we think about our kids as parents, I think many of us know what their strengths and needs are. We kind of have an idea of the things that they like and the things that they don't like it's so much.

But when we have kids who struggle with it, things [00:06:00] like gross motor and fine motor. So let's just be really specific. Gross motor is things like climbing stairs, climbing up ladders. Those sorts of things, jumping. Those are gross. Motor skills. But when we're talking things about fine motor skills. So to put it in a play perspective building blocks, being able to stack them Lego, being able to put them together.

Right. So we talk about those. What are some of the things that we as parents should be looking at, or considering when we're thinking about the toys that we're bringing into the space that might help to enhance any or all of those.

**Connie:** [00:06:35] Yeah. Well, I think again, play is relevant to all of us children and all abilities.

And my advice is general too, but applicable to everybody though. It's really about giving our kids time to play at home, giving them the space to do it, and then giving them the materials and that all of these things, all of these materials to have to be somewhere, they can see them and [00:07:00] easily reach them all on their own.

So knowing your kids' abilities for what they can reach, she worked with where they are. And if gross motor is the issue, then you need open space. If you can, you don't want toys, littering the floor, you want them organized so that you've got a nice big open area. And I'm always looking for Like that there's an area rug or some comfortable way to be on the floor.

And then if it's jumping then is a mini trampoline, something that's beneficial. Like I think there are resources out there that people have maybe been given some suggestions on what those toys and materials are, and now make sure it's somewhere that your kids can see all the time, access it on their own very easily.

So that you're going to make sure it gets used. If you've got that mini trampoline in the laundry room, up against the wall behind the drying rack, it's probably not going to be getting used, but if you are making sure you have that open space in your basement play area or [00:08:00] wherever you're able to create that space, it's right there out in the open and a much more likely chance your kid will, will use it.

And then the same with a fine motor, that's always in my playgroup notes after my consultations, like here's a list of different, fine motor activities that's relevant for all children. And again, I've maybe helped you set up the art cart or an art box that is put somewhere where your child is able to reach it on their own.

There's going to be Plato in there. There's you we've looked at what building materials you have and made sure you have things that they're using. They're fine. Moore's for building with so. It's really about making sure your child knows where it is because it has been the same space all the time. They can see it when they're looking around for something to do.

Oh, right, there's that Play-Doh that I know I'm allowed to go to the table with and play with and work on my fine motor skills and that they're able to reach all on their own so they don't have to stop and wait for someone to help them get it. They can just grab it all on [00:09:00] their own.

**Delphine:** [00:09:01] I think what's hard for some of us who live in a very urban setting is that we can, I think we get overwhelmed by thinking that we need a ton of stuff to fill a really small space.

And I've certainly looked at some of your before and afters where you can tell it's not a huge space. But it's the effective use of what you're putting in there. So I was thinking like the art cart, like I know that when you mean it's that Ikea like three leveled one, and it's got wheels, you can wheel it around, which is nice because it means that you can put it, tuck it in a corner where, to your point.

Kids can see it, but it's not stuck out in the middle of the living room. It can be wheeled away against a wall in a corner where you can see it, but then brought out to wherever the table is. The table doesn't necessarily have to be right beside and part of the gross motor movement could be okay.

Pulling the cart, right? That's one of those gross motor skills where you're pulling the cart across to the table, [00:10:00] which that incorporates both pieces together. So I think sometimes as parents, we get stuck in thinking, but it has to be in this corner and it has to be this and that. And I love that you're showing the flexibility of what it can be instead of one specific thing.

**Connie:** [00:10:13] Yeah, absolutely. And we are with limited space. You're really wanting to make the most out of what you do have and look at the shelving that's available. And I really like using the cube shelves for just a few bins and each one has different material in it and yeah very good ways to get lots of good play in a small space, for sure.

**Delphine:** [00:10:36] So my three kids pay with stuff all the time. They get stuff all over the floor. I'm stepping on Lego. I feel like sometimes I'm running on that treadmill with the pieces of Lego, constantly hurting my toes as I go very sharp. But their attention spans are pretty short. And so I find we're constantly dealing with an overwhelm of stuff.

And I know at one point when they were really little, we were [00:11:00] lucky enough we had enough space where we could have bins. And so we would put some toys away, a bin for a month and then we would swap them out. So that there was a bit of a Ooh, look, this is new. I haven't seen it in a while.

It's not new. It was an old toy, but it had been gone for a while. So they sort of forgotten. But what are some suggestions for families when it comes to the overwhelm of the toys? Like how do you start the pair down of what you have?

**Connie:** [00:11:23] Yes. Well, it's not hard to understand this. Like the kids are overwhelmed by stuff.

Just the way we are. Like how often can the place be a big mess? And you're like, I don't even want to deal with this. I think I just want to leave the room. And so it makes sense that if your kids are in a space and the toys are everywhere. It's just hard for your brain to be able to notice individual toys that are available.

And overall, you're just seeing this mess and you're like, well, there's nothing to do. I just need to get out of here. It's absolutely about editing the stuff that you have and trying to reduce it. And as you mentioned, the rotation system works for some, I [00:12:00] know, even personally as a fairly organized person that a rotation system does not work for me.

So if I'm putting something in the closet, I'm just going to forget about it. And in three months time, we can make a donation. So that's always my recommendation. If people are having hard time letting go of stuff, like we'll stick it in the closet, no one talks about it for a few months, then it can disappear.

But then what we do with the toys we have is is sorting it into piles so that all of your. Same toys are together. So all the little people are in a group. All of the animals are in a group, all the Duplo or what in blocks, then we're also looking okay. I help families understand all of these materials you have here are for the purpose of building.

They're all different building toys. Do you need five different building toys? Which two or three are the most popular. And they'll like, the Lincoln logs are they're the marble run or there's extra ones that like really aren't getting much use and are taking up quite a bit of space. So I'm helping teach the family [00:13:00] like the value of each toy and what type of play it encourages, and then helping you understand, okay, I've got all the cars in a pile and we have 40 cars like that.

They all do the same thing and she. People claim their kid loves every single one at which might be true, but if they only have five out, they're going to play with those five and be totally happy. So trying to really. Edit the amount of stuff that's out and available. And it certainly the goal is that at the end, everything is sorted and has a place to go.

And when you look at it it's uncluttered and not overwhelming. And then this makes cleanup so much easier because you know where each item goes, which also makes you feel more relaxed. When you see a mess. I find that it's like in my own house, We'll have so many bins of things dumped, but all those bins are labeled.

They all go back in the same shelf. And I know it's going to take 10 minutes max to put it away. [00:14:00] So I'm not freaking out every time I see the mess, because I know it can be solved so quickly and easily. And then the other comment on overwhelm though, is that it's not just about all of the stuff, but I also encourage like white furniture natural rugs and paint.

And I really don't like the bright primary foam squares that are so common in like basement spaces. Like it's also about creating a visually calm space to reduce the overwhelm too. And then when you have this nice neutral backdrop, the materials stand out, that's where you're getting your color and the things you want the kids to be focusing on.

So that all helps with creating a nice calm space.

**Delphine:** [00:14:47] Containers with lids or containers without lids.

**Connie:** [00:14:51] When they're clear, like it really depends on people's space and what we're using for storage. So for example, like in an Ottoman [00:15:00] with doors I like to use clear bins that are, have lids so that you can stack them a couple high.

Or, and then in the cube shelving though, the big open bins for a collection of things. Does work, but in general, I really like the clear lidded bins for being able to see things easily. But then you also to make the whole space look calm and uncluttered is having the solid bins that has a light collection in each one.

**Delphine:** [00:15:32] Okay. So then I'm trying to think of like kids grow up, kids get bigger, life happens and we have to start to move on from the toys. I've tried to do the edit, but when the kids are home with the edit, it's like, Oh yeah, I want to play with that. And I want to play with this. So how do we move forward with our kids in our play spaces?

Because obviously they're going to change over time because kids grow [00:16:00] up and they grow out of toys. So how do we create spaces that keep up with the growing needs of our kids?

**Connie:** [00:16:08] Well, certainly don't ever edit when kids are around whenever I'm scheduling a job, that's always the recommendation. Make sure the kids aren't there because as soon as you start sorting, they start noticing everything and they are pulling it out and they were playing with it.

But out of sight, out of mind is true for them too. So doing the edit when they are not there And like I had mentioned earlier, maybe putting some of the items that, you know, aren't actually getting used very much into the closet and seeing if it actually comes up it's a good strategy for sure.

And then when you have everything in a place you'll notice when. Cause after the sorting happens in the organizing you'll the kids will know everything that's there and they will play with them. And then there's some that really just have no interest in any more. And you try to notice, okay.

That's [00:17:00] when that hasn't been used, I can put that away now and then pass that on after.

**Delphine:** [00:17:08] So there's tons of things we can put in playrooms. Goodness knows. You can go to any toy store, any like any EBIT, nevermind toy store, like buy and sell Facebook sites. I mean, there's always stuff coming up. There's always really enticing things, but are there specific sort of.

Essential are there essential toys that should be in a playroom? I don't know if there's like the, ~~you know,~~ you think of essential, you know, reading materials, you think of essential child stories. ~~Like~~ Robert munch should probably be on every kid's shelf at some point, if they're lucky enough to be able to have the books in their house.

~~Right.~~ But are there any really essential toys that we need to kind of as parents that can maybe. Span a large amount of time with the kids, but that can be a really versatile, really essential toy.

**Connie:** [00:17:57] Yes, I have my favorites for [00:18:00] sure. And then when I'm looking at a playroom, I'm thinking of all the different areas of play.

So some are just general, but then some are more specific. For example , when I'm thinking about building toys, my absolute favorite is Duplo. Which is the giant Lego by, by the Lego brand. It's, the pieces are big enough that they're safe from one and a half years old, and there's so many variety of shapes and they come with people and animals and , My kids, even my nine year olds will still play with the Duplo, even though she's into the smaller Lego more now, but there's just a super long life with that.

It's an open-ended toy. So this is in general, you always want open-ended toys, which means that. Every time you play with it, you can do something different. Your child uses their own imagination. It's it's very easy to say that any toy that takes batteries and makes noise and talks that a child is not a good use of space.

That's a very, it's considered [00:19:00] more of a one and done toy. It does one thing. It doesn't engage the child. They're not using their imagination to use it. And the class it's like the. Toy animals or toy dolls. Like that's all so amazing for imaginary play that kids are acting out real life scenarios and understanding the world and putting their imagination into it.

And then I certainly want art materials around for kids , if only markers and crayons and paper and scissors and glue really the basics should be open up, but it. Open-ended enough that there's so many things you can do with it, but each time you sit down with them, you do something different. What kind of drama can you offer?

It can be as simple as putting out one of the parents shirts and other parents hat and Amir for kids to pretend that there's somebody else. So it really doesn't take much, but I like to just think of all those different learning areas.

**Delphine:** [00:19:58] I love the idea of. [00:20:00] Kind of bringing in different things into different spaces.

And I love the idea of the mirror idea in terms of giving them that other person to look at. I mean, it's still them, but it's them being someone else, which I think is really fun. And so much of this as you're talking, I'm like, it really does kind of, for any ability. Really stands to reason that it's workable.

Right? So what's the biggest piece of advice you'd give to families. When they're looking at setting up their space, what would you give them as kind of the little nugget? If you could leave them with one little piece today in terms of they're looking at what they have, and they're saying, okay, I need to make a change because it's not working.

What's your little piece of advice that would work.

**Connie:** [00:20:46] Yeah, certainly do look at what you have and sort it. So you know what different piles you have and you need some sort of storage for that. So you want some sort of shelving, do you have a bookshelf [00:21:00] already is a cube shelf, a good way to go. Can you take things out of your buffet and put in a different cupboard in the kitchen so that that's where you're able to store things.

So think of your storage. Yeah. And then really the key thing is, so every single item that you are putting in that space needs to have a permanent home so that everyone knows where it is tidy up is so easy that you know where it's going to get put back. And when new things come in, that means something's got to go or you need to be able to find a new place for it.

**Delphine:** [00:21:35] It's the one for one. And we always in the lead up to the holiday season. So in our house, we have two birthdays in October and we have one kid in November and then we have Christmas. So from all that time leading up to we're like, okay, so we know new things are coming. We got to start to like slowly move them out.

It's overwhelming when you start to think about it. And I don't know about anybody else listening and Connie is probably doesn't happen in your house, but it [00:22:00] happens in our house, the happy meal toys collect, like I don't even know. And then I go to clean up the toy room and I'm like, why do we still have these?

They're not. They're not, some of them are imaginative. She has the little people, my daughter has the little people like the Mr. Tickles and the, like the Mr. Long notes. Those she really plays with the other ones. I'm like, I don't know why we still have these, nobody's playing with these. So. Yeah, go ahead.

**Connie:** [00:22:28] Sorry, just the, a good trick for those is the tiny toy company that can sometimes up cycle them. If you know that company that is a woman named Rebecca that can put them to other uses. So that's a nice option for some of those tiny toys. That's what I need to do with those. I need to hang on to them so that we don't.

**Delphine:** [00:22:46] Lose them and just throw them into the garbage because it's it, that's the other thing that I hate about doing the toy edit is I feel so bad throwing them out. So where possible we donate or give them away, but it's really quite it's one of those things where you go through and you're [00:23:00] like, ah, I need to, like, I don't know what to do with them.

So then you don't want to throw it away. Right. But the tiny toy company is actually a really good. Yes. So are there any. Books or resources or things that you would suggest parents take a look at when they're looking at doing their playroom, you know, when you think about setting up a space in your house, sometimes you go to like the decorating magazines and you get inspiration from there, but where can parents get inspiration other than your awesome Instagram page, which often has great suggestions, but where can parents, let's go for inspiration for playgroups.

**Connie:** [00:23:36] Yeah, I think certainly check out my website and Instagram and not specifically playroom, but I really recommend the book called simplicity, parenting using the extraordinary power of less. Res calmer, happier and more secure kids. And that books by Kim, John Payne, who was an education and family consultant that [00:24:00] would, that has, is full of advice for like ways to simplify your life.

Home and schedule and your environment. So it kind of does walk you through ways that you can edit things. And with him having great success with street children that had emotional issues or behavioral or attention issues that just by helping families create these commerce spaces resulted in improvements in all areas.

So that's a book that I would suggest. And then I really love the Ted talk. By sir, Ken Robinson called Do Schools Kill Creativity. And it just helps families think about how like the, one of the gifts of being an educator is just that we got to know so many students so well and genuinely understand how they all have different strengths and different talents and different ways of learning.

And. Just that school doesn't always necessarily cater to your child's interests. And [00:25:00] that creativity is like one of the most valuable skills for the workplace now. And especially in the future. And home is really the best place that we can be supporting their interests and fostering that creativity.

I recommend that Ted talk to. Those are some good ones that Ted talk is a really good one. I've seen it a couple of times. It's really powerful message at the end. Yes. And just 20 minutes. Yeah. It's a quick, it's a quick and simple one. Right? Some of those Ted talks, they're all really, really good, but some of them are long and bless us parents, but we don't always have an hour, an hour and a half to, to watch the awesome messages that are there.

So the short ones are always really good. Connie, thank you so much for tonight's conversation. I am already thinking of the things that need to maybe go in our play space and a couple of different things. I think we might need to do that. The eldest is now 11, so I think things need to shift a little bit from it's hard when you have a A bunch of kids in different age range.

Right? Cause we have five to 11 is our [00:26:00] spread. So we've got to keep the five-year-old entertained, but we've also got to make sure we give some space for 11 and nine-year-old as well. So it's a challenge for sure. But thank you for sharing your expertise with us. My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Where can people learn more about what you do and get in touch with you? I know you did mention the website once or twice, but I know there's lots of other places people can find you. Yes. So the website is Connie houston.com and the, my Instagram handle is at Connie. Understand. Or Houston. And on the website, you can see details about my services.

I offer the in-home consultations in the greater Toronto area, and I'm also available for virtual consultations, wherever you are in the world. And regularly offer webinars that are listed under the workshop section of my website. That's awesome. Thanks so much, Connie. Again, this was a, this was great.

I'm going to go clean up the playroom now.

[00:27:00] Oh, great. Thanks for having me. Thanks. Take care. You too.