

Importance of Play in Early Childhood



For most of us, “play” is one of the first things that comes to mind when we think of young children. In the early childhood field, we watch and engage in children’s play daily. But do we really understand the value and importance of play? As educators we are busy observing and assessing, goal-setting, and planning activities. It is easy to get caught up in all of these very important tasks, but the good thing is that play is at the heart of all of it!

Play is a NECESSARY part of childhood. Play is one of the first ways that children learn to communicate. Children also learn to work together cooperatively through play and have their first experiences with conflict resolution. For teachers, play is an excellent forum for observations. There is so much to be learned about a child while observing their play.

There are some common misconceptions about children’s play. The most frequently heard is that play is a “break from learning” or “the opposite of learning”. In the field of early childhood, we know that this is not true. Children learn best through play. Play comes naturally to children and gives them a chance to make sense of the things they encounter in their world. Children are natural explorers. Teachers can help encourage this inherent curiosity by providing, stimulating, hands on activities for children. Another popular myth is that free play has be chaotic. With the right materials and teacher involvement, free play can produce a calm environment in which children can independently explore.

"Play comes naturally to children and gives them a chance to make sense of the things they encounter in their world. Children are natural explorers."

TEACHER ROLES

There are several roles that teachers can take on during children's play. They range from uninvolved to helping direct children's play scenarios. Below are some examples of teacher roles:

- **Onlooker-** Teacher observes but does not join in the play. This would be a good strategy for when teachers need to complete observations. This also works for when children want to have an "audience".
- **Stage Manager-** Teacher helps children prepare for play and provides assistance during play but does not enter into the play. This can be a good strategy when younger children are first engaging in play with one another.
- **Co-player-** Teacher joins in the play and functions as an equal partner with the children. During this type of play the teacher follows the children without giving any direction.
- **Play Leader-** Teacher exerts more influence and takes deliberate steps to enrich and extend play episodes. This type of involvement can be helpful when a teacher is trying to observe specific skills.

(Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005)

SUPPORTING PLAY AT DIFFERENT AGES

There are different ways to support children's play at each age. It is important to have an understanding of developmentally appropriate play behaviors for each age group.

Infants

Babies from birth to 12 months are mainly engaging in exploratory play. For young infants, teachers can provide them with various objects to touch and explore. Around 6-8 months babies begin to understand object permanence (knowing that an object exists even when it is out of sight). This is a good time to introduce "peek-a-boo" games. Older infants are experiencing growth in their fine and gross motor skills. They are beginning to understand the size and shape of objects. Shape sorters and stacking rings are great to introduce at this time.

Toddlers

All toddlers enjoy repetition! They will want to repeat the same songs and activities over and over again. This is important for their development. Younger toddlers are beginning to engage in early symbolic play. They may use a block as a pretend phone. They are also beginning to communicate with others. At this age they begin moving from side by side, or parallel play, to interacting with each other. Toddlers enjoy motor play. At this age their gross and fine motor skills are developing rapidly. This is a great time to encourage them with manipulatives such as, interlocking building blocks, lacing toys, and pegs with peg boards.

Preschoolers

At this age children engage in many different types of play. They enjoy playing together and may require less intervention from teachers.

- **Constructive play-** This type of play involves using materials to build or create something. A child engaged in constructive play will be working towards a specific goal, not just exploring materials. This type of play includes, block play, sand and water, art, and computer games.
- **Motor play-** Motor play includes any type of physical play such as, running, skipping, climbing, riding bicycles, and rough and tumble play. Many times, we will see this type of play during outdoor time.
- **Organized symbolic play-** During this type of play children begin to engage in role playing. At the preschool age, children may re-enact things they are familiar with or create their own fantasies. This type of play truly showcases their imagination.

PLAY ACROSS INTEREST AREAS

There are many ways to embed learning within free play. Each interest area holds so many opportunities for working on developmental skills.

Block Area

The block area is a great place to talk about concepts such as shapes, sizes, patterns, and counting. Some vocabulary to use are words such as over, under, behind, above, and below. Adding accessories to the block area provides opportunities for imaginative play. Literacy materials such as clipboards, pencils, blueprints, construction books can also be added to encourage early literacy experiences.

Dramatic Play

The dramatic play area is a great space to work on social and emotional skills. Children have the opportunity to create and act out scenarios. Teachers can help to extend play in this area. If the children are playing restaurant, give them some vocabulary words to use. Provide them with different scenarios to work out. For restaurant, add menus, pads of paper, and pencils to encourage literacy. Work on math concepts by discussing how much each food item will cost.



Math

Programs may choose to have a designated math area or math may be integrated into many areas of the classroom such as dramatic play, fine motor, or blocks. Instead of using flash cards and worksheets, engage the children in hands on activities. If a child is stacking blocks ask them to count how many blocks make up their tower. If they are lining up racing cars, encourage them to create a pattern.

Art

Be sure art is a choice for children throughout the day. Remember art experiences for children are about the PROCESS not the product. Providing children with a variety of art materials brings out their creativity. Many times, their drawings and paintings can spark important conversations. Art exploration can also be a great time to observe fine motor skills.

BRINGING PARENTS ONBOARD

As early childhood educators, we know the importance of play. Part of caring for children is also helping to educate their parents. Here are some tips to help parents understand the important work their children are doing each day.

- Invite parents to the classroom to see firsthand what their children are working on each day.
- Display pictures near the entrance of the classroom of the children engaged in play-based activities.
- Consider holding an educational parent event about learning through play.
- Create a tip sheet with information on the importance of play.

Always remember the importance of teacher engagement. Children love to play with their teacher! Free play is a great time to bond and spend some time with each child individually.

**To learn more about the importance of play, check out our “Play for Development and Learning,” a training offered by Professional Development. To register click [here](#).*