

## What's Inside...

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## PRUNING

Babies begin to experience the sights, sounds and sensations of the world and they build connections with these experiences. The brain then begins to fine-tune itself, strengthening connections it uses and "pruning" away the connections not used. Weak connections are "pruned" in much the same way a gardener would prune a tree or bush, by keeping the growth they want and discarding the rest.

**Example:** At birth, babies can distinguish all sounds of every known language but if they grow up hearing only their own language, their brain strengthens those connections and lets the others go. By about age 6, learning new languages becomes more difficult.

## What is Play?

Play is engaging in recreation for amusement and fun! When you play, you amuse yourself with a chosen activity or you participate in a game, sport, or activity with others. When we think of childhood, we think of smiles, laughter and joy. This is the time in life when new experiences occur daily and are adventures in learning and growing. Think of playing peek-a-boo with a baby. The surprise and laughter that occurs brings pure joy to both parent and child and yet from this simple activity a child is learning about ***object permanence*** (*the awareness that objects continue to exist when they are no longer visible*).

- Play is an opportunity for young children to make a connection between their personal world and activities that are happening in the environment around them.
- Play helps children develop a variety of skills because they learn through exploration and discovery.
- Play is how children develop their social skills by interacting with other children and adults.
- Play is where and how reading, writing and language skills begin to develop.

This bulletin focuses on the importance of play, what it does for children and how we can best support children in play. A simple way to define childhood play is to say that ***Play is the work, the occupation of childhood, and a cherished part of our early memories.***

## Why is it Important to Know about Play?

Play has changed from what it was 10, 20, or even 30 years ago. Children spend more time in child care programs and technology has changed the type of games and toys that children use in their play. Because play is the foundation of academic readiness, children need all kinds of play experiences. The importance of a child's play should never be over-shadowed by these changing trends.

### Brain Development in Early Childhood

Parents want their children to be stimulated intellectually and they want them to participate effectively in social interactions. They worry and question, "Am I doing enough for my child?" This concern can cause some children to be pressured into trying to learn too much too soon. Because we know that the brain grows quickly during the first few years of life, it may be assumed that this is when children can learn the most and fastest. However, this assumption is not supported by research. It is the interconnections of neurons, not the amount of brain growth, which determine speed and depth of learning. Older children, not infants, toddlers and preschoolers, have these interconnections occurring at a rapid rate and this "age of

reason" (around six years of age) is the ideal time for formal instruction.

There is abundant research that supports the theory that young children are not ready for formal instruction and that young children are naturally programmed to learn the skills they need for survival. Research also tells us that play helps children improve their thinking, social, language, and problem-solving skills. Some parents and schools, with good intentions and who truly want what's best for children, are putting pressure on early child educators to prepare children for success at an earlier age. They expect to see activities and assessments in language and math and may not realize that play is the primary way young children begin to acquire and master these important pre-academic skills (basic three R's).

**"Play is essential for building resilience, managing stress and achieving major milestones in a child's social, emotional and cognitive development."**

**--American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006**

## The Three I's: Interaction, Imagination and Integration The Basic Foundation for Learning Readiness

*"Early childhood programs should offer active hands-on curricula that reflect the basic three I's rather than the basic three R's because school success is enhanced by active, child-initiated early learning experiences."  
--Marcon, 2002*

1. *Interaction*—Children need repeated meaningful social and real interactions. Knowledge is built through watching and imitating others. Successful social interactions build self-esteem and create self confidence which is essential in making good decisions. Through meaningful hands-on interactive activities, young children practice and improve language, listening, social and reasoning skills (i.e., adult modeled problem solving)
2. *Imagination*—Children need multiple situations to dream, wonder and expand ideas. Children have a natural sense of wonder and curiosity. They have a basic need to understand their surroundings. Creative and imaginative play motivates children to wonder and explore ways to use new knowledge, look for answers to questions and practice new skills (i.e., dressing up for a make believe situation).
3. *Integration*—Children need a variety of opportunities to integrate play with learning experiences and to link old and new knowledge (i.e., pre-writing skills using crayons, markers, and paper).

### How Play Supports Learning

- Teaches rules and structure
- Develops literacy skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing
- Builds on concepts to develop new skills
- Helps to develop peer relationships
- Provides experiences about different people and their roles
- Allows interactions in meaningful and enjoyable ways
- Promotes imagination and creativity

## How Does Play Support Children's Learning?

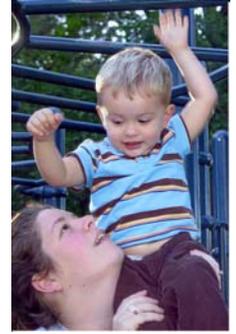
Children make sense of their world by being actively involved with their environment. It is through play that children connect to their environment and develop their imagination and physical, cognitive and emotional strengths. Play allows children to explore the world and overcome their fears while practicing adult roles. Play also helps develop new skills that lead to confidence and the ability to face future challenges. Through play, children learn simple concepts and use these concepts to build an understanding of more complex ideas. Child-directed play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, and to resolve conflicts that are important to them. It also encourages children to practice their decision-making skills, move at their own pace, and discover new areas of interest. Adult directed play is used occasionally to teach children to follow and listen to directions.

It is important to remember that all children are different. There is a general path of development that all children follow but not all children will go the same way at the same speed. Children do a lot of experimenting when they play. They discover their likes and dislikes. They figure out what helps them and what hurts them. They learn to imitate what others do and how sharing works. They learn how their minds and bodies work together to solve problems and have fun!



Child-Directed Play	Adult-Directed Play
The child or a group of children decide for themselves what they will play or create.	The activity is directed by the adult and incorporates a learning activity.
<b>Example 1:</b> Children go to an art center to make a Mother's Day picture or card.	<b>Example 1:</b> Children are given step by step instructions to create a Mother's Day card (perhaps incorporating a literacy lesson about the letter M).
<b>Example 2:</b> Children decide to play "Grocery Store." They decide who will play each role, what they each will do, and what props they need.	<b>Example 2:</b> After a field trip to a grocery store, the teacher has the children make different foods from play-dough to teach different colors/shapes of food.

## How Can We Support Children in Play?



### Children are hardwired to need:

- Repetition
- Novelty
- Expansion and integration

### Parents can teach children by:

- Joining in the play
- Watching to see what they are trying to do
- Providing support so they can accomplish what they are trying to do
- Presenting new challenges when they are ready
- Being spontaneous and having fun!

### *Different kinds of play: What it does and what to do*

- **Dramatic Play**—helps children work out their own ideas. *Provide dress-up clothes, props, human and animal figurines.*
- **Manipulative Play**—develops small muscle control, eye-hand co-ordination and teaches about relationships between objects (essential for math and science). *Provide puzzles, pegboards, construction sets, and toys with interlocking pieces like “Lego’s” or “Lincoln Logs.”*
- **Creative Arts**—encourages self-expression and develops fine motor skills. *Provide poster and finger paint, crayons, markers, scissors, glue, clay, and all types and colors of paper.*
- **Physical Play**—promotes body awareness, coordination and opportunities for social interaction. *Provide bikes, scooters, climbing structures and other wheeled toys.*
- **Game Playing**—teaches about taking turns, planning strategy, sequencing, rules and cooperation. *Provide checkers, card games, jacks, board games like “Candy Land.”*

### Parentese Happens in All Languages

When you see a baby you’re very likely to start talking in a high-pitched tone and stretching out your vowels. Experts call this sing song talking to babies “parentese.” Babies will turn their head to hear it, even if words are spoken in a foreign language, because they like the high-pitched sounds and also like watching our faces as we talk to them. The elongated vowels, high pitch, exaggerated facial expressions and short, simple sentences actually help infants learn to talk and understand language. Parentese uses actual words, in short and simple sentences, often repeated over and over again.  
Example: “Who’s my li-i-ttle baaybee? You are soooo cuuuute! Yes, yoooo are!”

## Parents as First Teachers

Parents have a tremendous influence on their child’s development- cognitively, emotionally, physically and socially. Surrounding children with language is crucial to their development yet easy to do in very simple ways. Parents can play music, read, sing and talk to children. They should maintain a continuous conversation with the child, from before birth and beyond, by talking about what they and the child are doing.

Older children should be asked open ended questions like “What do you think?” or “How can we fix this?” By providing writing and reading materials (crayons, paper, books, magazines and toys) parents encourage learning and creativity. Remember that every child is an individual and may want different types of activities at different times. Sometimes children look for intense stimulation and other times they prefer calm play. Learning the signs and signals from a child will allow a parent to respond appropriately to their child’s needs.

### Parents and Infants

Playing with babies begins by engaging all of their senses (eyes, ears, nose, hands, and mouth.) Parents and caregivers can encourage visual interactions by sharing books that have large colorful pictures and displaying colorful simple art work and mobiles in a baby’s room. Providing soft rattles and squeaky toys help infants hear and feel sounds. A crib gym can assist in physical growth. Singing and cuddling is essential to their comfort and well being and is the foundation for future relationships. Talk to babies about what is happening like saying “Let’s take a bath” or “I’m going to change your diaper.” Use short sentences like “All gone” and repeat the same words over and over again. Singing and cuddling is essential to babies and the foundation for their well being and future successful development.



### *How Do You Encourage Playtime for Babies?*

**“Back and forth”**—Coo and talk to babies continuously and imitate the sounds they make. Encourage babies to copy you (show them how to make a toy work then let them try).

**“Peek-A-Boo”**—Hide behind your hands or another object and say “Peek-a-boo, I see you” as you remove your hands from your face.

**“Sing and dance”**—Listen to different kinds of music and dance in different ways while holding your baby to see what your baby likes best. Sing a favorite song or lullaby (“Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”).

**“Play Ball”**—Give your baby a ball or other toys with different colors and textures to explore then encourage interactions (rolling, dropping, bouncing).

**“Lap Rhymes”**—Hold your baby on your lap facing you and play (“This Little Piggy,” “Peek-a-Boo” or “Teddy Bear”). These rhymes appeal to a baby’s need for repetition.



What the Baby Does	What the Parent Does
Hears sounds	Sing, talk softly, play music
Babbles and makes sounds	Repeat the baby's sounds
Recognizes names	Play simple games (hide objects, "Pat-a-cake")
Uses gestures	Sing simple rhymes and songs ("Itsy-Bitsy Spider")
Enjoys picture books	Look at books and talk about the pictures

**Toys for Babies**—mobiles, rattles, chew toys, squeeze toys, cloth books, pop up toys, busy boxes

**Finger Plays** are tools for practicing fine motor skills, following directions and introducing concepts. Demonstrate the actions as you sing or say the words.

*The Itsy Bitsy Spider*

The Itsy, Bitsy Spider climbed up the water spout  
 Down came the rain  
 And washed the spider out.  
 Out came the sun and dried up all the rain,  
 And the Itsy, Bitsy Spider climbed up the spout again



**Parents and Toddlers**

Toddlers enjoy more active types of toys (tricycles, wagons, stick horses) that help in large muscle development. Sand and water are fun ways for them to experiment with size, shape and weight. Toddlers enjoy being read to frequently and playing near other children (parallel play). This is very important to help children learn manners, how to share, wait their turn and develop friendships.

*How Do You Encourage Playtime for Toddlers?*

**"Ready, set, action"**—Play "Ring around the Rosie" and "London Bridge" or take toddlers to the park, playground or on a nature walk. Create an obstacle course indoors on a rainy day or pretend to move like different animals.

**"Let's do it again"**—Toddlers learn through repetition, so read their favorite books and sing their favorite songs over and over again.

**Name that tune**—Sing songs and read books with rhyming words because words are easier to learn this way. Encourage moving in different ways to a variety of music and offer musical instruments for them to make noise with (toy drums, tambourines, or safe homemade instruments).

**Busy hands**—Provide opportunities for toddlers to push buttons, open boxes, turn pages. Provide crayons, paint, play dough, and other material for art activities. Let them experiment with sand and water. Provide real objects for toys (boxes, pans, keys).

**Make believe play**—Provide props (hats, jewelry, clothes, boxes, pots and pans, etc.) to encourage playing "dress up" or "house" or any idea your child shows an interest in.

**Play Dough Recipe**

- 1 cups flour
- ¼ cup salt
- 1 cup warm water
- 2 teaspoons cream of tartar
- 1 teaspoon oil
- Food coloring

Mix all ingredients, adding food coloring last. Stir over medium heat until smooth. Remove from pan and knead until blended smooth. Place in plastic bag or airtight container when cooled.

*"The young child learns by constructing and reconstructing the world through play-generated learning experiences."  
 Elkind, 2006*

What the Toddler Does	What the Parent Does
Imitates play (peek-a-boo)	Say simple rhymes, sing songs, make hand gestures
Says first words and follows simple directions	Talk, talk, talk... , talk about what the child is doing or seeing and repeat words and sounds the child makes
Likes songs, music, rhymes and books	Read stories, play music, do finger plays

**Toys for Toddlers**—plastic tools, play food, animal farms, shape sorters, nesting cups, push and pull toys, balls.



## Books for Children & Families

*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, by Eric Carle. The story of a caterpillar's journey with lots of repetition.

*Mother Goose*, Arthur Rackham, illustrator.. Time-honored rhyming book.

*Brown Bear, Brown Bear* by Bill Martin Jr. Children learn to repeat phrases as they learn colors and animal names in a rhyming pattern.

*Baby Animals* by Kimika Warabe. A book with bright pictures that can be propped up.

*Best Word Book Ever* by Richard Scarry. Paper pages with many pictures on each page.

*Five Little Monkeys Jumping on a Bed* by Eileen Christelow.. A silly rhyming tale that children love.

*Pat the Bunny* by Dorothy Kunhardt. An interactive book for babies and toddlers.

*Ears, Nose, Fingers, and Toes* by Judy Hindley. Rhymes invite children to understand how their bodies work.

*The Itsy Bitsy Spider* by Iza Trapani. A tale of adventures based on this childhood favorite song.

*Where is Baby's Belly Button?* by Karen Katz. An interactive book for babies and toddlers.

*Peek-A-Boo!* By Janet Ahlberg. A book to spark a game of peek-a-boo for babies and toddlers.

*Barnyard Banter* by Denise Fleming. This book will invite children to copy the noisy animals.

*Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown. Children learn names of objects with lots of repetition.

*Fuzzy Yellow Ducklings* by Matthew Van Fleet. An interactive book that features different textures, colors, shapes and animals.

*Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. An imaginative child travels to exotic and far away places.

## Parents and Preschoolers

Children who are older are ready for more organized social play. They love to dress-up in anything adults wear (clothes, hats, high heels, purses). Providing furnishings for dramatic play encourages creativity and socialization. Re-creating a different environment (restaurant, hospital, grocery store, garage, beauty parlor) where children and adults play various roles can be fun and educational. Toys can be important to learning but you don't need to spend a lot of money. Find items you have around your home and gather them in plastic bins for easy access and clean-up (boxes, pots and pans, Tupperware, measuring cups and spoons etc.). Giving a child time to be messy is also a good learning experience. Playing in mud, sand, and water are hand-on activities that teach about textures and the environment. Children can express their imagination and creativity through art, music and movement. Providing simple tools for creating art and playing music is an excellent way to spark their creativity.

### *How Do You Encourage Playing with Preschoolers?*

**“Family and Friends”**—Invite friends over to play or take them to places where they can interact with other children.

**“Say it With Music”**—“Statue”, “ Freeze,” “Hokey Pokey” and “Musical Chairs” are fun musical games. Use movement to interpret music, stories and poems. Experiment with various sounds, instruments and games (“Follow the leader,” “Guess what I am,” “Statues” and mirror imaging). \*

**“Quiet as a Mouse”**—Looking at books, listening to stories, and drawing pictures build language skills and imagination.

**“Project Art”**—Provide art supplies or have an art area that is always filled with supplies. Provide unusual materials for art work (wood scrapes, macaroni). Have children make up stories and illustrate them.

**“Act it out”**—Encourage fantasy play with dress up clothes (hats, scarves, jewelry) and props (bowls, boxes, containers). Recycled large boxes can be painted or decorated for a dramatic play environment (car, spaceship, house).

**“Top Chef”**—Involve them in safe cooking and science activities.

**“Five W’s”**—Ask open-ended questions starting with who, what, where, when, and why... “What can we do at the playground?”, “Why did you choose that color?”

**“Home Improvement”**—Offer traditional and different materials to build with (cardboard cartons, tubes, index cards, clay, wood scrapes).

**“Riddles”**—Challenge older children with riddles to encourage them to think in new ways and reinforce language skills. (*What did the broom say when it got tired? “I’m feeling sweepy”*). Have them make up their own riddles or “Knock Knock” jokes.

\*Books to get them moving: *Wibbly Pig Can Dance* by Mick Inkpen, *Here Comes Poppy and Max* by Lindsey Gardiner, *Moondance* by Frank Asch

Kinds of Play	Toys
Active, physical play	Balls, riding vehicles, gym equipment
Dramatic, imaginative play	Creative props (pretend food, boxes, containers etc. and dress-up apparel)
Creative, expressive play	Crayons, paper, paints, scissors, music
Social play	Board games
Thinking play	Books, tapes, puzzles, writing material
Word play	Joke*, riddle** and rhyming books***

\*Tad Hills, *Knock Knock, Who’s There?*

\*\*Mike Downs, *Pig Giggles & Rabbit Rhymes*

\*\*\*Dr. Seuss books

**Toys for preschoolers**—play dough, crayons, finger paints, dress-up clothes, dolls, stuffed animals, pretend foods, blocks, trucks, “Legos,” action and animal figures



## The Goal of Early Childhood Education



The goal of early childhood education is to help children develop the abilities, knowledge, and temperament needed to help them make sense of the world and to succeed Kindergarten. Children need to refine physical movements (gross and fine motor skills), develop social skills (sharing and getting along with others), and acquire practical hands-on experiences.

Early childhood learning environments should provide a variety of experiences and materials for children to see, hear, touch and connect with their surroundings. A successful classroom offers a variety of learning opportunities through play. During play children use hands-on exploration and sensory learning to test new experiences, relate these experiences to their existing knowledge and store this information for future use. Ideally all of these experiences need to occur in a comfortable social setting.

**How to get to the academics:  
"Will you teach my child to read and write?"**

Childcare providers should respond with a rousing yes! Provide a writing center with all kinds of paper and writing tools and book corners where children & adults can interact with each other. Provide a literacy rich environment (labels and signs, helper and attendance charts, daily schedules and calendars). By surrounding young children with print and engaging them in literacy activities children will learn about reading and writing on a continuous basis.



When Children Do This:	They Are Learning to:
Play with blocks (building, dumping, creating)	Coordinate muscles (Fine motor) Understand size, weight and number concepts (Math, Science)
Dramatic play (dress-up)	Understand experiences (Abstract thinking) Relate to others (social skills)
Play with puzzles, sort pictures	Match & clarify (Math)
Draw, cut, paste, model with clay	Use symbols, communicate (Reading/writing readiness)
Listen to books	Develop language
Sing or movement games with others	Develop social Skills
Catch and throw balls	Eye-hand coordination

### Teaching through Play: Center Time

Early childhood education facilities offer a wonderful opportunity for children to learn and socialize. Play centers allow children to flow from one activity to the other in a structured (*adult directed*) manner or in a self-interest (*child directed*) approach. Following are some examples of centers and the materials they might include:

Books	Books of all types (narrative, poetry), listening center with books on tape or CDs, storytelling with props (flannel board, puppets, story clothesline)
Writing	Writing paper, envelopes, pencils, markers, word banks, letter stamps, alphabet cards
Math and games	Collections of objects (buttons, stickers, bottle caps), number cards, interlocking cubes, parquetry blocks, attribute games, graphing mats, sorting trays, decks of cards, board games, dice, puzzles
Science/discovery	Plants, class pets, nature objects, collections (shells, rocks, leaves), tools for investigating (magnifying glasses, magnets)
Music & movement	CDs, instruments, keyboard with headphones, picture songbooks, props for movement (scarves, flags, streamers)
Art	Materials to paint or draw on (newsprint, butcher paper, finger paint paper, foil), painting and drawing tools (markers, crayons, paints, chalk), cutting and pasting materials (scissors, glue, collage material), materials for constructing (foam, wood scraps, wire, pipe cleaners), art books, photographs, posters
Dramatic play	Props and dress-up clothes, kitchen furniture, dolls, open ended materials (fabric, tubing, cardboard boxes), literacy materials (magazines, cookbooks), math and science material (calendars, cash registers, measuring cups, spoons)
Blocks	Unit blocks, hollow blocks, props, open-ended materials (cardboard tubes, and panels)
Technology	Computers, printers, software

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## Talk, Talk, Talk: Enriching and Reinforcing Children's Play

Parents and other caregivers can integrate play with learning by becoming an active participant in the child's play. Asking questions, describing actions, taking the child's lead and then re-directing his or her interests to expand to other areas are invaluable to a child's development.

### REMEMBER TO:

- Observe children to see which discoveries they are engaged in. Through watching the discovery process, you will be able to find the best ways to relate to their play.
- Allow the child to direct the play. Avoid the temptation to teach children specific lessons. Instead let their interests be your guide. The activity the child chooses is the most important thing for the child to be doing at that moment.
- Participate without taking over or interfering to let the child's play unfold in its own way and time.
- Let activities go on longer than you might think they should before you try to help. Assistance given too quickly might interrupt a significant learning experience.
- Expand a child's interest by reading books on the topic.
- Describe what the child is doing—"I see you used green and blue to paint the water."
- Take field trips to expand areas of interest (A trip to a home improvement store if they enjoy building, a trip to a farm if they love animals).
- Ask open ended questions and offer suggestions that might help them express themselves:
  - ☞ Ask the child to describe what they are doing—"Tell me about what you are... (building, painting, etc.)"
  - ☞ Ask questions that invite your child to look for new possibilities or solutions—"What do you think will happen if...?" or "What could this string be used for?"
  - ☞ Ask the child to use his or her senses—"Close your eyes, what do you hear?" or "Guess what I have put in your hand?"
  - ☞ Ask children about changes—"What would happen if you could fly?"
  - ☞ Ask questions with lots of answers—"What floats in water?" or "How does sand feel?"

## Conclusion

In play, children make choices, solve problems, converse, and negotiate. They create make-believe events and practice physical, social, emotional and cognitive skills. It is important to understand and remember that a young child's engagement in play of all types is one of the best predictors of later school success.

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**WE KNOW WHERE TO LOOK FOR ANSWERS.**



### Workshops of Interest

The ECDC can provide information and workshops on a variety of topics tailored to the interests and needs of parents and early childhood professionals. Resources are available on such topics as general child development, developmental issues for children with special needs, coping strategies, and specific disabilities.

Workshops include:

- Including Children with Special Needs in Child Care
- Creating Working Alliances with Families
- Early Childhood Development: The Meaning of Red Flags
- What Are Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education
- Moving On: Children and Families Facing Transition

### Who We Are

The Early Childhood Direction Center (ECDC) is a regional technical assistance center for the State Education Department providing information, referral and support to families, professionals, and community agencies concerned with young children birth to five. We are located at Syracuse University's Center on Human Policy.

**ECDC services to families are free and confidential.**

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