Play is the Work of Early Childhood

Mr. Rogers said it best when he declared “Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.” In early childhood education classrooms, play is not only the work of the children, but also of the adults. Teachers, assistants, social workers, therapists, and directors can be excellent facilitators of play. Quality teaching occurs when adults are thoughtfully and deliberately playing with children.

What’s Inside...
♦ Young kids learn through play: Science backs this up
♦ How do babies, toddlers and preschoolers play?
♦ What are they learning?
♦ The role of the teacher
♦ Buzz word: Floortime
♦ Resources

Brain Research & Play

Mr. Rogers is not the only one who believes in this assumption about play. Scientific research points to play as the most appropriate and effective way for young children to acquire and master important pre-academic skills. Evidence suggests that children are ready to learn from formal instruction around the age of 6, but preschoolers truly need to play. “The experience of play changes the connections of the neurons at the front end of your brain,” says Sergio Pellis, a researcher at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada. "And without play experience, those neurons aren't changed," he says. Pellis goes on to say that those changes have a strong impact on developing the ability to regulate emotions and solve problems. Play prepares the brain for life, including formal instruction. In recent years, pressures facing students and teachers in elementary school has begun to trickle down to preschool classrooms. As a result, parents and teachers, with good intentions, have been expecting more formalized instruction with clear products that demonstrate mastery of many concepts. While the brains of young children can certainly master skills and ideas necessary for school success, they do so from exploring, moving, pretending, engaging, painting, building, talking, and playing.

10 things teachers should do to enhance brain development:
1. Water breaks!
2. Provide cooking activities
3. Cross lateral movement activities
4. Share emotions
5. Have novel things
6. Include daily gross motor activities
7. Talk to children throughout the day
8. Keep consistent schedules and routines
9. Provide responsive care giving
10. Set up stimulating environments

The American Academy of Pediatrics believes in the importance of play:

- The AAP suggests that early childhood programs offer "true toys", such as blocks and dolls, with which children use their imagination fully.
- The AAP advises families to choose childcare and early education programs that meet children's social and emotional developmental needs as well as academic preparedness.
- The AAP says “free and unstructured play is healthy and - in fact - essential for helping children reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones as well as helping them manage stress and become resilient.

Sources:
## Let’s get practical: Connecting play to learning

### How do babies play?
- Back and forth interactions
- Listening
- Reaching
- Touching
- Mouthing

### What are they learning?
- To visually track
- How their bodies work (they can control their muscles!)
- Object permanence
- Cause and effect
- They are loved

### What can a teacher do?
- Sit on the floor with babies
- Talk to babies
- Sing
- Model simple toys
- Set up a safe appropriate environment

### So what you’re saying is...
- You don’t really disappear when we play peek-a-boo?

### How do toddlers play?
- Explorers: learn by doing
- May have a goal in mind
- Parallel play
- Practice new skills
- Beginning to pretend

### What are they learning?
- How objects work
- Discovering connections between toys and objects
- Developing language
- Practicing turn taking, sharing, and cooperation (seriously!)

### What can a teacher do?
- Provide several of the same toys/objects so toddlers can play side-by-side without pressure to share
- Play with a toddler: model sharing/turn taking and simple play schemes
- Model language; talk about what you see toddlers doing

### How do preschoolers play?
- Engage in more organized social play
- Associative and cooperative play
- Pretend play: dress-up, or assign roles to small toys
- Complexity has increased in all areas

### What are they learning?
- Social skills like:
  - Turn taking, cooperation
  - Problem solving
  - Writing
  - Critical thinking
  - Math
  - Science

### What can a teacher do?
- Provide a balance of child directed & teacher directed
- Play! Follow student’s lead
- Let preschoolers attempt to problem solve, help if needed
All you do is play all day?

It can be easier to feel like real teaching is going on when kids are sitting at the table completing a task. Then there is a product and it is apparent if kids can count, know their colors, and understand concepts. BUT, we know that young kids should be playing! Play is the work of young kids – play is the work of early childhood professionals too!

The Role of the Teacher: What should I be doing?

**THE OBSERVER**

- Observe: sit on the floor quietly, take notes, watch for:
  - The most popular toy, item, center, teacher, material, play area, etc.
  - The least popular toy, play area, center, time of day, material, etc.
  - Are the kids sharing, problem solving, taking turns? Trying to?
  - Is there a blossoming area of interest? (Weather? Dinosaurs?)
- Report back to your team: make changes, try new things, imbed new ideas into your plans
- Consider: Taking turns being the Observer; assign an observer once a week; observe different students noting challenges regarding behavior, general participation, knowledge, etc.

**COMMENTATER**

- Extension of the Observer: comment on your students’ play without interfering
- Use positive language
- Say what you see (ex. You are building with blocks!)
- Extend with non-threatening language (ex. What do you think would happen if you put this block on top?)
- Model language for sharing and turn taking
- Compliment! (ex. I love you that two are working together!)

**INTENTIONAL PLAY PARTNER**

- Sit on the floor!
- Read books (Babies: point to pictures of common objects, label; Toddlers: have toddlers join in on repetitive lines; Preschoolers: ask them to predict, retell, sequence details)
- Toddlers: model playing with toys using self-talk (ex. I’m putting all the little people on the bus. Now it goes!); join in simple pretend play; model language to share and take turns
- Preschoolers: imbed some concepts (ex. We have 3 people at this picnic, but only 1 plate! How many do we need?); help extend their play; accept a preschooler’s invitation to play
- Playing with young children validates their ideas, helps to establish warm relationships, and is an easy way to facilitate learning.

Child-Directed VS. Teacher-Directed

We know young children learn best through child-directed play, but teacher-directed play activities can be a valuable part to any early childhood classroom. In planning teacher-directed activities, teachers should consider:

- Is it developmentally appropriate? (Can my students sit and attend for this long? Is the content or required skills reasonable?)
- What modifications and/or adaptations are necessary to implement for all my students to participate?
- Is classroom time balanced? There should be more child-directed play time.
- Responsive to students? Are they engaged? Interested? Able? Be flexible and ready to adapt to the needs of the students, by either seizing a teachable moment based on interests, or changing up plans to re-engage the class.
What is Floortime?

Floortime is a methodology that has become increasingly popular in early childhood education. It was developed by the late Dr. Stanley Greenspan and is designed as play-based intervention to be used by parents and professionals with young children. Research has shown great benefits using this approach with children with Autism, and many therapists and teachers have adopted Floortime when approaching kids who have been diagnosed with Autism. However, the main ideas of Floortime can be implemented, with positive results, with any young child. It allows the child to be the leader and encourages the teacher to be supportive, and to eventually extend play.

The five steps of Floortime are:
1. Observation: listen and watch to determine how you should approach the child
2. Approach (open circle of communication): Acknowledge the child’s emotional tone and then build on the child’s interests at that moment
3. Follow the child’s lead: as you support the child’s play, they feel validated, connected and understood.
4. Extend and Expand play: make supportive comments about the play so the child remains the leader of the play, but is able to express their own ideas.
5. Child closes circle of communication: by building on your ideas with words or gestures, the child closes the circle of communication and is beginning to value two way communication and engagement.


Looking for more copies of this bulletin? You can download it from our ECDC website or contact us.

RESOURCES

- The Playful Brain: Venturing to the Limits of Neuroscience, By Sergio Pellis and Vivien Pellis, 2013. Oneworld.

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 All Kids
- Parent Partnerships
- Developmentally Appropriate Practices
- Early Childhood Development: The Meaning of Red Flags
- Supporting Social Emotional Development
- Challenging Behaviors
- Moving On: Transitioning Families (EI-CPSE) & (CPSE-CSE)
- What Are Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education?
- What is an Individualized Education Program (IEP)?
- Writing IEP Goals
- Getting Ready for Kindergarten

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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WHILE WE TEACH OUR CHILDREN, THEY TEACH US.

Over 35 Years Caring for All Children