

THE DYNAMIC POWER OF PLAY: NURTURING LEARNING, LANGUAGE, AND THINKING!

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**Play is an integral part of children's
development**

Throughout the early childhood period play changes and expands but it continually impacts all areas of development.

Play is:

Active	Self-initiated	intensely involving
Spontaneous	A way of learning	internally motivating
Enjoyable	Engaging	Persistent

The ages and types of play

Infancy: during this period we see the beginning of exploratory play as they see, feel, touch, mouths, and manipulate objects in their environment. They also play with the people in their space as make sounds, wait for echoes, and repeat sounds. This language play continues throughout the early years.

Toddlers: Continue to manipulate and play with objects and toys in their world. They often add sound effects and want labels for these items. They play by themselves (solitary play) or beside a peer (parallel play).

Preschoolers, PreK, and K: Enjoy playing with words, phrases, and jingles. They are more dramatic in their play using symbols, taking on roles and persisting in their work. Their play is moving toward more collaboration with others, adjusting their roles, and participating in a sequence of events. Language accompanies their play activities, new vocabulary is gain from others, and creative possibilities are evident.

Primary Grades: Physical play is important as they begin to learn about games with rules. Continue to play with language, words, and writing. Exploring and experimenting becomes more refined as they test out ideas, problems, and possibilities. Group work allows children to impact the experiences and build their creative confidence.

Learning in Play

Play provides integrated learning opportunities with many different abilities and skills developed simultaneously. This also allows children to work at their level and be successful in their play experiences. Play

encourages making choices, planning their work, enlisting others in their ideas, and following through to completion.

To help clarify the wide range of learning domains that are positively impacted by playing each will be described separately. But, it is important to remember that each interacts with other areas as well as impacting individual capabilities. In early childhood there is a focus on developing the “whole” child and play is one of major ways this amazing learning can take place.

Brain Development

New ways of scanning the brain and understanding integrate connections have lead researches to conclude that experiences during play are essential to the development to neural pathways. Play provides many opportunities to make those brain connections, as children manipulate objects, talk, solve problems, construct, and adjust their behaviors.

Needs of children:

- An adult who prepares the environment in a way to support play.
- Follow the children’s interest in play, centers, and other experiences.
- Encourage play exploration with unique and changing materials.
- Provide time for play with children their age as well as others.

Language and Literacy

In play young children are able to connect the words/sentences to action. This expands their vocabulary, understanding, and comprehension. As children talk about what they are doing they are learning that language communicates to themselves and others. As they take on roles in socio-dramatic play they use the language of someone else and watch to see if they are understood. When books, writing tools, and environmental print are added to the area they are able to use these materials to expand their language and literacy abilities.

Needs of children:

- Open-ended materials that provide many choices and possibilities.
- Peers of varying abilities to communicate with and interact.

- Large and small group opportunities for influencing the actions and experiences.
- Adult play tutoring when need to expand or support language in play.
- Books, writing materials, and other environmental print that relates to their play.
- Documentation and pictures that will provide inspiration for talking about their play, and reflecting on experiences.
- Using stories to play, dramatize, or retell.
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21'st Century Skills: The Four Cs

Critical thinking/problem solving: Dealing with new issues, problems, determining solutions.

Communication: Being able to communicate ideas, thoughts, and procedures to self and others.

Collaboration: Being able to adjust and work with others on projects, teams, and implementing plans.

Creativity: Thinking of unique ideas, originality of thinking, fluency of possibilities, and evaluating actions.

Needs of children:

- Play that encourages construction and building.
- Group projects that require working together.
- Reflecting and talking about play.
- Encouraging unique and usual play with materials, and centers.
- Elaborating on the ideas of others.
- Playfulness and imagination

Physical Development: Small and large

In play there are many opportunities to use and refine motor skills. It is not exercise or drill but rather motions that are required to accomplish in the play. For example, using heavy wooden blocks for construction play requires that the children move, place, and build with these large and heavy materials. Or, when a child is making flowers out of paper to use on the table in home living they are using small motor skills.

Needs of children:

- Varieties of materials are provided that encourage large motor actions.
- Tools for constructing and writing are provided in each area and center.
- Small groups can build and create props for play indoors and outside.
- Natural materials are included in choices, centers, and activities. For example sand, dirt, leaves, water, and clay inspire sensory and small motor play.

Social Skills

In the early years children begin to develop social skills while playing with others, observing others, and interacting. In these “real” situations children can see how their actions impact others, influences their behaviors, and encourages working together.

Needs of children:

- An attitude of respect for all children is established in classroom.
- Small group play where young children work with 3-4 other children.
- Teacher support when needed to help state, restate, or suggest ways of dealing with issues.
- Modeling by teacher, peers, or others that demonstrates appropriate behaviors.

Emotional Development

During the early years young children are dealing with many emotions. Play provides an avenue where they can “try out” actions, responses, and adjustments. In this safe environment children can develop empathy though role playing, they can observe the impact of anger, and they can determine what language or behaviors works with other children. Play therapy is used to help a child deal with individual crisis.

Needs of Children:

- An emotionally safe environment where the child feel able to express thoughts, feelings, and concerns.

- Home living center where outfits and materials match their interest, culture, and gender.
- Play opportunities that encourage role playing with appropriate dress-up and props.
- Observation of children in play and recognizing emotional issues demonstrated.
- Puppets added to home living, library area, or other centers where appropriate.

Nurturing Play in the Early Childhood Classroom

- ❖ Teachers who value play and design the environment to support that belief.
- ❖ Sufficient time and space for play to occur.
- ❖ Play materials that are open-ended, provide choices, relate to the children, and inspire imagination.
- ❖ Display of materials, tools, and props so children can see their options, make choices, and return them when play is completed.
- ❖ Documentation, language and pictures, of children in play.
- ❖ Play centers, episodes, and projects discussed and reflected on with children, and sometimes parents.

“Children are built to play and build through play”. (Brown, 2009)

For additional reading:

Brown, S.L. & Vaughan, C.C. *Play: How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul*. New York: Avery.

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Isbell, R. *The Complete Book of Learning Centers* revised edition with CD. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

Sluss, D. *Supporting play: Birth through age eight*. Clifton Park, NY: Thomson Delmar learning.

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