

Play-Based Learning

As adults, we don't often deconstruct play to consider the various interconnecting physical, emotional, and/ or intellectual demands of the activity. Viewed superficially, play may look, sound, and feel like nothing more than disorganized, often noisy, fun. In fact, there is more learning that happens in play than meets the eye. Children problem-solve on multiple levels, extend their own thinking or that of a friend, decode social behaviours and expectations, and

more. Careful observations of children at play usually reveal important information about what they are able to accomplish at this stage in their development, and what they are ready to learn next. The role of the educator is to advance children's knowledge and thinking through adult-guided activities during the play. An important way to view this balance of support during play was introduced by Ann S. Epstein in her resource *The Intentional Teacher: Choosing the Best Strategies for Young Children's Learning*.

Child-Guided Experiences + Adult-Guided Experiences = Optimal Learning

Child Focused	Child-Guided	Adult-Guided	Educator Focused
Not entirely child-controlled. Educator is not necessarily passive.	Generally follows the interests and actions of children, but with strategic educator support.	Generally follows the goals of the educator, but learning is also shaped by the participation of the children.	Not entirely educator controlled. Child is not passive.
The children in the home centre choose to take the dolls for a walk to the grocery store.	The educator observes that the children in the home centre are going grocery shopping and suggests they write a list of what they are going to buy.	The educator joins in the play at the home centre. She suggests that they should go grocery shopping and that it is a good idea to make a list of what is needed.	Children in the home centre tell the educator that they want to make a grocery list. They tell the educator what they wish to record and the educator writes it for them.
Possible Zone of Actual Development.	Zone of Proximal Development.		Task is too difficult.

(Adapted from Epstein, *The Intentional Teacher*. p.5)

Children play in their zone of actual development and push themselves to move to the next step in their learning. They reinforce the skills they have mastered through repetition and practice. In this example, the children chose not to make a shopping list for the store, possibly because it is slightly too difficult for them to do independently. The educator must decide whether her goal for this group is to have them write independently, using the strategies they have already developed.

First, the educator must determine what the children know about writing and what they can be expected to accomplish. If the task is too hard or the children are not sufficiently motivated, the educator may choose to leave that goal for another opportunity (child focused), or to model the task (educator directed) to show them what it would look like. However, if the educator decides this is an ideal guided learning opportunity, she may choose to initiate the task from either the