

POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND ABOUT PLAY AND LEARNING

Play builds knowledge and skills, layer-by-layer, according to where the child is developmentally

Play brings all aspects of learning together, integrating cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development

- While schools persist in presenting knowledge according to discrete subject matter, play is the forum in which all areas of learning and development come together in a natural process. In the above anecdote, the children are using language for various purposes, exploring sophisticated science concepts such as the properties of matter, using mathematical knowledge, discovering principles of technology, are physically involved, and are navigating the social relationships of a working community.

Play that is self-directed, needs no external motivator

- When absorbed in play, there is no need for external rewards or gimmicks to keep children on track. It is not necessary for an adult to praise the children's involvement in their activity, it is enough to simply acknowledge it. This is especially important with younger children. When an adult acknowledges, for example, that the children are very busy creating a station for the trains, she sustains their engagement. The children in the previous anecdote stayed engaged in their play for hours. It has been noted that at the post-graduate level of university, persistence and perseverance are better predictors of success than IQ. Children need many opportunities of sufficient length and complexity to develop these same valuable habits of mind. Many times, students who have been diagnosed as having attention difficulties and/or short attention span have been observed flourishing when given the opportunity to engage in a self-selected play activity.

Play is a social activity that forms the basis for participation in a community

- Through participation in play, especially role-playing, children learn how to take their place in a social world. They experiment with trying on roles, and in this way they gain perspective on what it is like to be the teacher, the radio announcer, the doctor. The skills of communication, working together toward a common goal, and accepting the ideas of others in sociodramatic play, are all necessary to maintain a harmonious community.

Play is one of the best forums at school to foster understanding and respect for diversity

- Acceptance and participation in play are based on behavior, not based on racial or cultural basis. Play provides a level playing field for all children to work and learn together. In many years of observing play, teachers say they rarely, if ever, see early primary children exhibit discrimination based on race or ethnicity. Children are included in a play episode if they are "good players", that is, good with the materials, if they stay with the theme-appropriate roles and actions, and if they tolerate the give and take that collaborative play demands.



- The child who is told by her peers, "If you don't play right, you can't stay", is likely to be the over-dominating child, the highly immature child, or the child lacking age-appropriate social and language skills. This is not discrimination based on culture or ethnicity, although at times it may appear so. When a child enters a classroom as a new immigrant, she may not have sufficient language skills to participate and she may bring cultural practices that are unfamiliar to most of the other children. These experiences during play may initially cause friction, but they provide the opportunity for the newcomer to learn the appropriate social behaviors for the context and classroom. At the same time, the other children learn that people may express themselves in different ways than those with which they are familiar.
- In early primary, children may not have sufficient social or linguistic skills to accommodate a newcomer and the educator must take on the role of helping this child gain entry. In the primary and junior grades, inviting someone who is new into play provides one of the most authentic opportunities to foster recognition and respect for other cultures. When the child who feels he is different is accepted into play, the result is a vital boost to his self-esteem. This is extremely important as children reach the middle years during which friendship becomes the most important factor in their life. The feelings of alienation that too many immigrant students experience is one of the causes for the brutal gang behaviors that have become all too common, even among children in the middle years.

Play is the finest method of instruction for students who speak English as a second language

- Play offers English Language Learners powerful motivation to learn how to communicate in English. In play, participants use language for a variety of purposes including giving directions, explaining details, giving voice to the imagination, negotiating and collaborating.

Since the uses are linked to an activity that is highly personal and carries the significant rewards of belonging and friendship, ELL students are motivated to dedicate tremendous energy into learning the language. Through play, the student acquires metacognitive understanding that can only come through participation in meaningful activity. They learn vocabulary in a meaningful context when it is introduced through play and hands-on learning.

Play has a profound effect on children with special needs

- Depending upon the child's needs, the nature of the participation may vary, but all children can learn through play. Moreover, play can be a tremendous source of joy for children regardless of their challenges.
- When children are engaged in play, the tensions and pressures of trying to do things that may well be beyond their capabilities are eased. Children who may be perceived as learning disabled may, in fact, be quite able in non-academic ways. As Howard Gardner (1994) explained, there are a number of different ways of being smart. Many special education children come into their own when given the opportunity for self-directed play.

Play is the practice ground for many kinds of skills

- In play, the social skills necessary to take one's place in society are given a solid foundation. Give and take, respect for the contribution of others, and listening with an open-mind to competing ideas are evident when observing children at play. The personal skills that enable individuals to thrive and attain their personal best are embedded in play. Technical skills are developed and perfected through use in play.

This kind of play teaches children that it is not always the outcome that is important, but the lessons learned in the doing. The opportunity for reflection – thinking back on a memory of the situation and projecting ahead to consider what might be done differently next time – is an important component for learning.