

# The Child's Right to Play



The *IPA USA*  
50th Anniversary  
White Paper



*Presented at the 2024  
IPA USA Conference*



# Why Now?

The child's right to play has reached a tipping point. Protecting childhood has been replaced with catching children up or getting them ready for a future grade level. The current focus on readiness ignores the extensive research and theories that have supported play for centuries. Instead, in an effort to accelerate development, current trends ignore 100 years of seminal research on developmental milestones and the dispositions learned through play that build the prerequisites for all future learning.

Over the last 40 years, children's play in neighborhoods and preschool, public, or private school settings has become increasingly limited and replaced with ancillary sports, dance, gymnastics, after school tutoring, and many other adult-led activities. The importance of play has moved from being a biological necessity for healthy development to being seen as a break from learning.

Childhood is no longer the sanctuary it once was, and child-led play is no longer recognized as the cornerstone of healthy growth. Instead, play is often viewed as a mere respite from learning rather than the biological necessity it truly is, on par with food, shelter, and safety.

IPA USA, the USA Affiliate of the International Play Association, IPA World, in commemoration of its 50th Anniversary and with the backing of 59 esteemed authors, is unveiling this White Paper. It serves as a comprehensive repository of research on the benefits of play and equips you with the tools for advocacy. This White Paper, comprising 57 articles across eight categories, presents a synthesis of the authors' research, offers specific strategies for promoting the child's right to play, and provides the evidence you need to bolster your efforts to safeguard childhood. The resource section provides policy briefs for each category, as well as a Press Release to promote the White Paper.



Deb Lawrence, President, IPA USA

# How to Navigate This Document

This document has been formatted to include live links within the Table of Contents, and with anchors in other areas to assist with cross-referencing authors, essays, resources, etc..

With this formatting, our readers will more easily be able to revisit and share certain key topics, authors, or resources without needing to scroll through the entirety of the document.

To jump to a section listed in the Table of Contents, click on the item.

To jump to a particular essay, first navigate to the category it listed under, then click on the essay title.

While we appreciate the size of this document and want our readers to be able to navigate it easily, we similarly hope that our readers will recognize the time, scope, effort, and passion for the subject matter that went into composing this white paper.

Please take the time to read it in its entirety before utilizing the navigation features to skip areas.

We hope you enjoy reading, and encourage you to share!

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# About IPA

International Play Association: Promoting the Child's Right to Play  
(DBA) IPA WORLD and the American Association of the Child's Right to Play  
(DBA) IPA USA



## A Brief History

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Special thanks to Dr. Joe Frost (1933-2020), the First elected President of IPA USA and International Representative, Play and Playground Expert, author of numerous playbooks and articles, and mentor to many for his contributions to this document.

## The International Play Association (IPA World)

In 1961, the International Play Association (IPA WORLD) was established. IPA WORLD is a non-governmental, charitable organization with members in 60 countries. Countries with ten active members can be recognized as country branches/affiliates, with representation on the IPA WORLD Council. When you join IPA World, you also become a member of IPA USA and are then eligible for benefits from both organizations.

IPA WORLD Branch/Affiliate Countries are Listed Below.

- Argentina
- Canada
- Germany
- India
- New Zealand
- Portugal
- USA
- Australia
- England
- Hong Kong
- Nigeria
- Sweden
- Taiwan
- Ukraine
- Brazil
- North Ireland
- Israel
- Japan
- Netherlands
- Scotland
- Turkey
- Wales



## IPA USA History

### Our Vision

*A world where all children can play*

### Our Mission

*The purpose of IPA USA is to protect, preserve, and promote the child's right to play.*

In 1973, the American Association for the Child's Right to Play was founded as a recognized branch/affiliate of the International Play Association (IPA WORLD). IPA USA is a not-for-profit organization holding a 501C3 with the IRS.

The American Association for the Child's Right to Play (IPA USA) will celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2024 at the Annual Conference in Greenville, SC.

### IF YOU BELIEVE THAT:

- Play, along with the basic needs of nutrition, health, shelter, and education, is vital for the development of the potential of all children, and that family participation needs to be strengthened by support systems such as play leadership *and*
- Environments and programs should meet children's needs by increasing opportunities for child-initiated play.

### IF YOU ARE CONCERNED THAT:

- Society is indifferent to the importance of play,
- Schools are indifferent to the importance of play,
- Passive screens are replacing children's active play,
- Recess is disappearing from school playgrounds to be replaced with more time for academics,
- Catching "children up" or getting them "ready" ignores the theoretical perspectives about how children develop.
- Children are increasingly living with inadequate provision for survival and development,
- Children are increasingly living in inappropriate housing settings with fewer spaces to play,
- Children are ignored in environmental planning,
- Cultural traditions are deteriorating, and children are increasingly exploited commercially,
- Children are constantly exposed to war, violence, and destruction,
- "Winning at all costs" dominates children's sports and play,

Join IPA WORLD and select the USA as your country to receive benefits from IPA WORLD AND IPA USA. Members become part of an international, interdisciplinary organization that supports and works for the Child's Right to Play. Visit our website at [ipausa.org](http://ipausa.org) to join and learn more about us.

**IPA-USA carries forth the mission of its parent organization, IPA World. To accomplish the Vision, Mission, and Guiding Principles, IPA-USA does the following:**

- Advocates for the ratification by the USA of the Convention of the Rights of the Child
- Acts as a resource for other national and international organizations and UN agencies by providing consultations, speakers, and serving on committees
- Increases awareness of the importance of play across the lifespan, infant, toddler, preschool, primary, middle, secondary, post-secondary, and adult play
- Produces Porch Play Chats, Podcasts/videos, which are conversations with people who are passionate about play. Porch Play Chats are available for free on the IPA USA YouTube Channel, IPA USA Facebook page, and Spotify.
- Developed a Play Quiz in partnership with Genius for Play to help parents and families assess the amount of time their young child has to play

- Published the Children in Crisis document In conjunction with the UNICEF Emergency Task Force; this document provides activities that support those working with children during a crisis.
- Promotes Trees over Screens by selling t-shirts to support limiting screen time
- Hosts Virtual Town Hall Presentations – Discussing Hot Topics and providing strategies and resources to promote child-initiated play.
- Convenes an Annual Conference to promote the child’s right to play

### **Benefits of IPA USA**

- Publishes an e-journal- Practical ideas to promote play in all settings
- Publishes a Quarterly PlayBlast Newsletter
- Recruits IPA Members to form Regional or State Chapters (Ex IPA USA California)
- Provides Mini Grants for National Day of Play, International Day of Play, Community Play Days, and trainings that promote child-initiated play.
- Recognizes individuals who have dedicated their professional careers to advocating for play by awarding Doctor of Play Awards at annual conferences.
- Recognizes individuals who have demonstrated their advocacy in promoting the child’s right to play by awarding the Child’s Right to Play Advocacy Award at annual conferences.
- Provides Policy Briefs to members on a variety of topics.
- Discounts to IPA USA Conferences
- Opportunities to serve as a committee chair or run for the IPA USA Board

IPA USA aims to protect, preserve, and promote play as a fundamental right for all humans. Membership is open to any individual, group, or organization that endorses the right of children to play, as stated in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959), Article 7, paragraph 3: "The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation which should be directed to the same purposes as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavor to promote the enjoyment of the right..." and in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Article 31:

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life. They shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational, and leisure activities.



### **IPA USA Conferences**

IPA USA held triennial conferences from 1981 to 2013 and now holds them more frequently.

- 1981 University of Minnesota
- 1983 University of Minnesota
- 1983 Austin, TX
- 1985 Washington, DC
- 1986 Cincinnati, OH
- 1989 Cincinnati, OH
- 1992 Denton, TX
- 1995 Birmingham, AL
- 1997 Longmont, CO
- 2001 Hofstra University, NY
- 2003 Baltimore, MD
- 2007 Rochester, NY with TASP2010
- Atlanta, GA with TASP
- 2013 University of Delaware
- 2014 Clemson, SC
- 2015 Clemson, SC
- 2017 New Brunswick, NJ Rutgers
- 2019 Harrisonburg, VA
- 2020 Speakers Series – Covid (online)
- 2022 San Antonio, TX
- 2024 Greenville, SC
- 2025 Kentucky

### **Past Presidents of IPA USA**

Paul Hogan\*

Joe Frost

Tom Jambor

Marcy Guddemi

Ann Obar

Audrey Skrupskelis

Rhonda Clements

Olga Jarrett

Tom Reed

Dorothy Sluss

LaDonna Atkins

Deb Lawrence (Current)

### **IPA USA's Timeline to Joining IPA World**

The American Association for the Child's Right to Play (IPA USA) was formed in Philadelphia in 1973 as the USA affiliate of IPA WORLD. IPA USA began by playground creator and author Paul Hogan's (1928-2021) 1967 trip to Europe. Hogan was checking out adventure playgrounds in London with Lady Allen of Hurtwood (founder of OMEP) when he first learned about IPA WORLD and began attending their meetings. The United States had IPA WORLD members before Hogan formed the affiliate. Mrs. Thomas Hess of Greenwich, Connecticut, was the first American member, and Pacific Oaks College and Children's School in Pasadena, California, was the first American organization member, having joined in 1969.

In the early 1970s, IPA USA membership had grown to the point that a national representative was selected to be sent to the next IPA WORLD Council meeting; at that time, the meetings of the IPA WORLD Council were held at the triennial IPA WORLD Conferences. The first USA representative was Paul Hogan, attended the 1975 Milan meeting two years after IPA USA was formed. The first president of IPA USA was not "elected." While attending that 1975 conference, Hogan met Muriel Otter (Canadian), the IPA WORLD secretary. She "cornered him and made him president of IPA USA." He consequently started *PlayPlans* magazine and began to secure subscribers and more members for IPA USA.

Elaine Ostroff followed Paul as USA Representative to the 1978 International IPA WORLD meeting in Ottawa. Donna Seline also attended the Ottawa IPA WORLD conference in 1978 and was appointed USA national representative by IPA WORLD President Polly Hill of Canada. Seline organized a regional IPA USA conference in 1980 at the University of Minnesota with keynote speakers Polly Hill and Brian Sutton-Smith. In 1981, Seline was the USA Representative in Rotterdam. A subsequent national IPA USA conference was held in 1983 at the University of Minnesota with keynote speakers Janet McLean and Joe Frost.

Later, in June 1983, The International Conference on Play and Play Environments, sponsored by IPA USA and twelve other state, national, and international organizations, was held at the University of Texas at Austin. This was reputed to be the largest gathering of play scholars ever convened, with more than 500 participants, and included representatives from twelve nations. At this conference, plans were initiated for a more formal organization of IPA USA and for the 1986 national conference in Cincinnati. After representing IPA USA in Ljubljana in 1984, Donna Seline submitted her resignation as national representative in July 1985, effective April 1986.

In February 1986, Donna Seline initiated calls for nominations for a formal Board of Directors for IPA/USA, and a mail election was held. Joe Frost (President and U.S. Representative to IPA WORLD World), Sue Wortham (Treasurer and Membership Coordinator), Marcy Guddemi (Newsletter Editor), and Board members Jay Beckwith, Harris Forusz, Roger Hart, Robin Moore, and Barbara Sampson were elected for three-year terms.

The 1986 IPA USA national conference was organized by Harris Forusz and was hosted by Adventure Playgrounds, Inc. and the University of Cincinnati. Formal resolutions were agreed upon, including a pronouncement of support for the IPA WORLD 1977 Declaration of the Child's Right to Play, adopted at the Malta conference in 1977 and revised at the Vienna conference in 1982. Additional details on modifying incorporation and bylaws documents were also addressed at this conference. Robin Moore and Joe Frost participated in the 1986 IPA WORLD Council meeting and special International Year of Peace seminar in Birmingham, UK. During this period, several adventure playgrounds were developed in the U.S. By 1987, IPA WORLD included members from fifty countries.

Thirty-five Americans attended the 1987 World Congress in Stockholm. By 1988 IPA USA membership had grown to 165. Later that year, a national conference was held in Washington, D. C., and it was organized by Barbara Sampson, Robin Moore, and Donna Seline. In 1988, Tom Jambor was elected president by mail vote. The 1988 IPA /USA Board members were Tom Jambor (President), Helge Stapel (Treasurer), Marcy Guddemi (Newsletter Editor), and Board Members Duraid Da'was, Robin Epstein, Harris Forusz, Paul Hogan, Lulu King, Mary Lillie, Ruth Morrison, Jack Pentes, Frank Rudloff, Donna Seline, Randy Smith, and William Weisz. In January 1989, this expanded Board met in Cincinnati and made plans for expanding revenue, newsletter, and membership and creating a clearinghouse on information. At the Tokyo conference in 1990, Robin Moore of IPAUSA, already an IPA WORLD international officer, was the first American to be elected IPA WORLD president.

### IPA WORLD History

- IPA WORLD is a charitable international non-governmental organization (NGO) founded in 1961.
- It provides a forum for exchange and action across disciplines and across sectors.
- IPA WORLD's purpose is to protect, preserve, and promote the child's right to play as a fundamental human right.

In 1923, Save the Children (1919) founder Eglantyne Jebb, a British social reformer, drafted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child.<sup>1</sup> Jebb believed that children's rights should be especially protected and enforced. These ideas were adopted by the International Save the Children Union in Geneva on February 23, 1923, and endorsed by the League of Nations General Assembly on November 26, 1924, as the World Child Welfare Charter.

During the 1930s and 40s, there was growing interest in providing quality play opportunities, mainly due to the work of Lady Marjory Allen of Hurtwood (1897-1976), a British landscape architect who made playgrounds out of the waste materials of WWI bombed war sites. These playgrounds became known as adventure playgrounds. This subsequently led to the passing of the UK Children's Act of 1948, and in 1955, a major seminar on playgrounds was held in Europe.

The need for international action was becoming more evident since the proclamations of 1923 were not enforceable by international law but rather only guidelines for countries to follow. Thus, with all this interest in play and playgrounds and unenforceable rights for the child, on November 20, 1959, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a much-expanded version as its own Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adding five more to make ten principles in place of the original five. Principle Nine of the 1959 Declaration of Rights addresses the child's right to "full opportunity to play and recreation..." In addition, November 20<sup>th</sup> was also adopted as the Universal Children's Day as the ongoing celebration of that event.

After the signing of the Declaration of the Rights of the Children, IPA WORLD was born in Scandinavia in 1961 as the International Playground Association and held its first conference in Copenhagen that year.

IPA WORLD has held 22 Triennial International Conferences thus far:

1961– **Copenhagen**

1964 – **Zurich**

1967 – **London/Liverpool**: Recreation and Play

1969 – **Paris**: Creative Play

1972 – **Vienna**: Play and Creativity

1975 – **Milan**: Adventure Playgrounds and Children's Creativity

1978 – **Ottawa**: Play in Human Settlements

1981 – **Rotterdam**: Growing up in an Adult World – Beyond Play & Recreation

1984 – **Ljubljana**: Innovation – Action

1987 – **Stockholm**: Creativity through Play

1990 – **Tokyo**: Play and Education

1993 – **Melbourne**: World Play Summit

1996 – **Espoo**: Dimensions of Play

1999 – **Lisbon**: The Community of Play

2002 – **Sao Paulo**: Culture and Play in Urban Spaces

2005 – **Berlin**: Play: Learning for Life

2008 – **Hong Kong**: Play in a Changing World

2011 – **Cardiff (Wales)**: Playing into the Future – Surviving and Thriving

2014 – **Istanbul, Turkey** (19<sup>th</sup> Tri-Annual Conference)

2017 – **Calgary, Alberta, Canada** (20<sup>th</sup> Tri-Annual Conference)

2020 -- **Jaipur, India** (Cancelled due to Covid pandemic)

2023 – **Glasgow, Scotland** (Play: Rights and Responsibilities)

2027- Christchurch, New Zealand

## Presidents of IPA WORLD

- C.T. Sorensen, Denmark
- Jens Sigsgaard, Denmark
- Valia Tanon, France
- Arvid Bengtsson, Sweden
- Polly Hill, Canada
- Nic Nilsson, Sweden
- Robin Moore, USA
- Jan van Gils, Belgium
- Michael Paris, Germany
- Theresa Casey, Scotland
- Robyn Monro-Miller, Australia

In 1979, The United Nations International Year of the Child injected IPA WORLD with new energy. Though IPA WORLD began its life with an emphasis on adventure playgrounds, it gradually changed its focus to play itself and to the child's right to play.

In 1989, the UN General Assembly Convention adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which strengthened the Declaration of Rights of 1959. On September 2, 1990, it became international law with one notable exception: the USA signed the Charter but has yet to ratify it.<sup>2</sup> The Convention consists of 54 articles that address the basic human rights of children, to which all children everywhere are entitled. IPA WORLD was instrumental in adding to Article 31, specifically the words "the child's right play." Shortly thereafter, IPA WORLD changed its name to International Play Association: Promoting the Child's Right to Play.

### **Benefits of Membership in IPA WORLD [Play Resources](#)**

- FREE WEBINARS
- DISCOUNTS FOR CONFERENCES
- [IPA Access to Play in Crisis Toolkit](#) *Play: Rights and Practice- A Toolkit for Staff, Managers and Policy Makers*
- [IPA Access to Play in Crisis Research Synthesis Report](#)
- **VIDEO:** [This Is Me: The Child's Right to Play](#)
- [PlayRights MAGAZINE](#)
- [IPA Declaration on the IMPORTANCE of PLAY](#)
- [Children's Right to Play and the ENVIRONMENT](#)
- [IPA Position Statement on the Play Rights of Disabled Children](#)
- [Children's Right to Play: An Examination of the IMPORTANCE of PLAY in the Lives of Children Worldwide \(IPA WORKING PAPER\)](#)
- [Children's Right to Play: A Booklet for a Richer Understanding of Children's Right to Play \(IPA Scotland\)](#)

# IPA USA Board of Directors

The IPA USA Board of Directors thanks our Authors for their contributions to this body of work. The IPA USA White Paper is free to all and accessible on the IPAUSA.org website.

**Debra Lawrence** - President

**LaDonna Atkins** - Past President

**Rusty Keeler** - Vice President

**Amanda McMickle** - Treasurer

**Barbara Norvell** - Secretary

**Whitney Woodward** - Membership Chair

**Kim Tabler, Peter Dargatz, Miriam Beloglovsky** - Members At Large

**Marcy Guddemi** - Historian

**Dorothy Sluss** - Parliamentarian

**Summer Beloni, Debbie Rhea** - Recess Chairs

**Lindsay Brauer Dzielski** - Play Days; Chair, State Advocacy

**Olga Jarrett** - Quarterly PlayBlast

**Emily Holder** - UNCRC Liaison

**Rachel Larimore** - Editor, eJournal

**Deb Lawrence** - 2024 Conference Chair

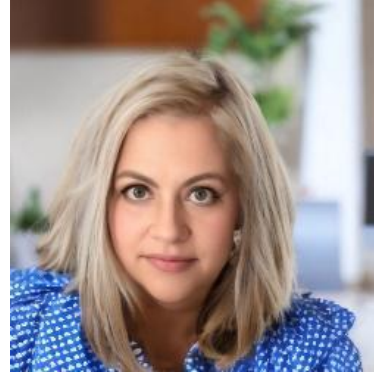
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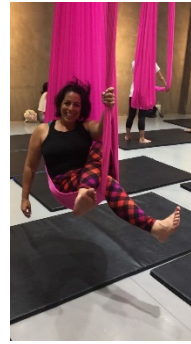
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**Category:** Readiness is Not What You Think  
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**Category:** Readiness is Not What You Think  
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**Category:** Readiness is Not What You Think  
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**Title:** The Playwork Approach to Supporting  
Play



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**Category:** Readiness is Not What You Think  
**Title:** The Significance of Choice:  
Empowering Students for Lifelong Learning



**Rhonda Pollock**  
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**Category:** Play as a Biological Necessity  
**Title:** How Does the Rhythm of The Day Set  
the Stage for Play



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**Category:** It's a Child's Right  
**Title:** Equity in Play: Ensuring Inclusive Play and Learning for All Children



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**Category:** Every Child Deserves a Break  
**Title:** The LiNK® Project – Developing Healthier, Resilient Children through School Recess and Character Skills



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**Title:** From Kindergarten to College: Embracing Playful Learning in Higher Education



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**Category:** Play Across the Lifespan  
**Title:** Playful Service Learning: Making University Courses More Engaging



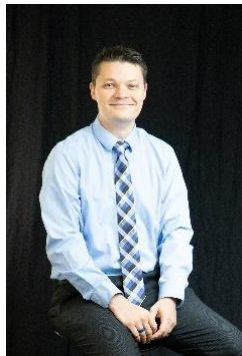
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**Category:** Play Across the Lifespan  
**Title:** Play with Infants



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**Category:** The Healing Power of Play  
**Title:** The Critical Role of Intergenerational  
Play in Bridging Generations and  
Healing Trauma--- A Tribute to Dr. Edgar  
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**Category:** Every Child Deserves a Break  
**Title:** The Importance of Choice

**Category:** Readiness is Not What You Think  
**Title:** The Negative Impacts of Standardized  
Testing: Why Authentic Assessment and Play  
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**Title:** Decoding the Collegiate Mental Health  
Crisis Embracing Playful Pedagogy and  
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**Category:** Nature is Essential  
**Title:** Nature Play: Early Childhood and Beyond



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**Title:** Playful Service Learning: Making University Courses More Engaging



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**Category:** Play Across the Lifespan  
**Title:** College students need to play, too!  
Understanding the issues and possibilities within college-aged play.



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**Category:** Nature is Essential  
**Title:** The Joy of Nature-Based Teaching



**Whitney Woodward**  
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**Category:** Readiness is Not What You Think  
**Title:** Play in the Primary School



**Joseph Yaure**  
**BS.Ed.**

**Category:** Play Across the Lifespan  
**Title:** Bringing Play Back to Middle School:  
How Games Boost Learning and Emotional  
Growth



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**Title:** Play with College Students

# Executive Summaries

*Executive Summaries are organized by category, followed by author.*



## Every Child Deserves a Break

This category addresses ways to ameliorate recess reductions, playground adequacy issues, and the lack of choice in classrooms across America. The authors have provided you with the research and strategies needed to advocate the position that every child deserves a break.

### Authors

#### **Are Playgrounds Meeting Children's Play Needs?**

Susan Chlebowski and Elizabeth Marcello

#### **The LiiNK® Project – Developing Healthier, Resilient Children through School Recess and Character Skills**

Dr. Deborah J Rhea, LiiNK Project Director and Professor-Kinesiology, Texas Christian  
University  
Deborah Rhea

#### **The Importance of Choice**

Dr. Brian A. Stone

## **Are Playgrounds Meeting Children's Play Needs?**

*By Susan Chlebowski and Elizabeth Marcello, Outdoor Play and Learning Consultants  
for Community Connections for Children, York, PA*

### **Introduction**

For various reasons, today's children have far fewer opportunities for self-directed free play outdoors. Urbanization, a perceived fear of strangers among adults, concerns about traffic, the prioritization of academic learning, rapidly increasing hours per day of screen use, and the overscheduling of children's lives have all contributed to a decline in children's play (Singer & Hirsh-Pasek, 2005). This reduction in play opportunities for children aligns with data showing rapidly rising rates of depression, anxiety, obesity, myopia, and attention and behavior disorders among children, creating a public health crisis (Louv, 2005). An immediate and full-scale response by all adults and organizations who work with and advocate for children's health and well-being is essential, and one solution is so simple we tend to overlook it: bring back outdoor play by creating playgrounds that truly meet children's needs.

### **Conclusion**

As Frost (1983) said, "The best playgrounds are never finished, but change and grow with the creative energies of children and playleaders." Frost's wisdom reminds us that children and adults are humans at very different developmental stages with distinct experiences, perspectives, motivations, and intentions. When adults work to understand the complex play lives of children and involve children in the design of play environments as much as possible, this collaborative approach may inspire the creation of easily accessed playgrounds that are stimulating, engaging, address a variety of play types, and better meets children's play needs.



## **The LiiNK® Project – Developing Healthier, Resilient Children through School Recess and Character Skills**

*Dr. Deborah J Rhea, LiiNK Project Director and Professor-Kinesiology, Texas Christian University*

### **Introduction**

As a nation, we have moved farther and farther away from what the child needs in school and focused more and more on what the adults want and expect from children. The U.S. wants to be at the top educationally, but they are going about it the wrong way. Since the 1980s, State and federal education officials have replaced an emphasis on a well-rounded education with an emphasis on standardized test scores. Instead of asking if the standardized tests are reliable and valid or if they accurately measure knowledge versus measuring what students have memorized, they continue to use these tests as a marker of excellence. Standardized tests contribute to a large majority of children exhibiting chronic stress and burnout by third grade (Rhea, 2021). The emotional and cognitive pressures and the extended preparation for a test score versus well-rounded content have removed whole child developmental needs from the elementary school setting.

### **Conclusion**

The LiiNK intervention has shown that when recess is offered throughout each school day for a total of 60 minutes, standardized test scores improve, and children begin to thrive in the school environment. In addition, character development and trauma-informed strategies are essential since many children today have never experienced empathy, learned how to make responsible decisions and own their choices, think critically and creatively, and problem-solve both on and off the playground, and for many, have experienced trauma, abuse, or neglect. These fundamental strategies are needed to activate the child's brain and promote whole child development.

## The Importance of Choice

*Dr. Brian A. Stone, Northern Arizona University*

### Introduction

A child's capacity to make meaningful choices in their life is essential to a healthy psyche. Freedom is the key condition under which an individual's autonomy exists and through which a person can exercise their agency and free will (Frankfurt, 1971). Even though freedom is a critical component of choice, most people experience a variety of constraints in their capacity for decision-making, including societal norms, cultural considerations, economic factors, institutional structures, and even psychological attributes that limit or dictate the types of choices and direction in which an individual may proceed (Bandura, 1986; Sen, 1999). The real-world restrictions on a child's choices can create a dearth of genuine pathways for them to exercise their individual freedom and instead create a bubble of pseudo-choices that diminish the child's unique nature.

### Conclusion

As children are continually deprived of meaningful choices and precluded from authentically playing during school hours, the negative impacts of this void of freedom are quite clear. Children are stressed, experience anxiety and depression, and lack the motivation and engagement to perform well in school (Abeles, 2016; Strauss, 2016; Robinson, 2015). Furthermore, they experience stunted development with decreased cognitive abilities, including critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and innovation. Conversely, if children were suddenly provided ample opportunities to exercise their freedom and agency in school, they would experience a vast increase in intrinsic motivation, persistence, and creative capacity. Children with the freedom to make important choices in the classroom will be highly engaged, develop a propensity for a life-long love of learning, and experience a healthier overall well-being. Teachers should build choice-driven environments that capitalize on the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness while also recognizing that play is a significant factor in a free classroom where children can be self-directed.

## How Parents Can Support the Child's Right to Play

As Bev Bos reminds us, many adults have childhood amnesia. They have forgotten the joy of discovery and exploration that filled their childhood. These articles help parents remember their childhood and provide strategies for incorporating more play into the lives of the children, so they too, can have play memories.

### Authors

#### **Supporting Children's Play in this Century of Technology**

Ruth Ann Ball, ABD

#### **Playful Parenting: How Parents Can Promote Play**

Melissa Briggs

## Supporting Children's Play in this Century of Technology

*Ruth Ann Ball, ABD*

### Introduction

To support a child in play, you must understand where, when, why, and how you played as a child, adolescent, and adult. Even in adulthood, play has a purpose; it is a process of active engagement. Play relieves stress. It is timeless – a time when we are lost in the moment, we can feel pleasure and feel alive. There are no goals, and you decide what the play will be. Play is different for each person. Play for an adult can be reading a book, dancing, playing a sport, gardening, or just listening and getting lost in music. Parents are children's first and most influential teachers. Recognizing the developmental benefits of play from infancy to adolescence equips parents with the knowledge to foster their children's creative and cognitive growth through Play. This paper offers research supporting the idea that children learn through play-based experiences at home and in the classroom and provides ideas for how to bring child-initiated play back into their daily lives.

### Conclusion

A challenge for parents with many children is respecting and celebrating each child's unique ability and interest. Every child has an individual personality and interests. It is essential to be "present" and listen to children.

Strengthening parents' understanding of the value of play is a starting point. Speaking to families at meetings or conferences about why play is essential and providing information on how play is critical to a child's development can help parents see the link between play and later school success. Having parents recall their childhood play memories and how their play helped them develop a range of skills will allow parents to recognize the value of play and the joy it brings to childhood. Following the play memory activity, helping parents see the value in allowing their children to have similar experiences and asking what they might try can give parents a plan to incorporate more play opportunities for their children.

Physically, children need places and opportunities to run, jump, roll, climb, hop, skip, and crawl. Parents can use local parks or provide big boxes, sheets to make tents, or other inexpensive materials and equipment at home. Being outdoors and active is healthy for children (Bongiorno, n.d.). Play reduces stress and anxiety, increasing physical, social, emotional, and cognitive health while providing children with an outlet for their physical activity needs. Parents need to make time for their children (Bongiorno, n.d.). Talking, listening to their questions when they ask "why," and asking questions to help children understand how the world works. Providing books and reading to infants and, as children grow, continuing to read for at least 20 minutes daily can increase language development and build vocabulary. Playing car games while driving or traveling, instead of putting on a video or providing an iPad or other device, builds strong relationships.

Children enjoy doing what they see happening in their world through role-playing. They are critical observers and want to do what they see the adults around them doing. "Turn everyday activities into opportunities to play. Play make-believe when cleaning the house, take turns making a story while running errands, sort foods by color or shape when shopping." (Bongiorno, n.d. & Blog, n.d.)

## **Playful Parenting: How Parents Can Promote Play**

*Melissa Briggs*

### **Introduction**

Play is misunderstood and not recognized as the language of a child. Recognizing the importance of play is essential for parents to understand and use it effectively. Parents often seek connections and a way to get involved in their children's lives. Parents also hope and long for their children to grow and build resiliency and strong character. Play can accomplish both of these needs. Play can give parents the skills to engage and connect with their children. Play can also allow children to challenge themselves, develop and grow their strengths, and work through their limitations. Play is a powerful and useful means of communication. This essay will explore the importance of play and strategies for how parents can promote play to develop a child and build a connection and relationship with a child.

### **Conclusion**

As parents engage in their children's playful worlds, they should reflect on and recognize what information they are learning about their children and how to use it to connect and develop meaningful relationships. Parents can maintain this playful response by finding ways to be playful in each aspect of their lives and challenging themselves to be flexible, spontaneous, and engaging.

## **It's a Child's Right!**

The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child explains why play engages the whole child's development. If you wonder who has access to play or would like more information about how Playworkers approach supporting children's play, these authors have provided research to help you advocate for every child's right to play.

### **Authors**

#### **Children Playing with Others, a Mother's Story**

Melissa Briggs

#### **Overcoming Play Barriers: Fostering Uninterrupted Play for WHOLE**

##### **Child Development**

Adrienne Hofmann M.Ed.

#### **The Child's Right to Play**

Olga S. Jarrett

#### **Play and Social Justice**

Olga Jarrett

#### **Equity in Play: Ensuring Inclusive Play and Learning for All Children**

Cindy Lee and Alexa Poyner

#### **The Playwork Approach to Supporting Play**

Dr. Shelly Newstead

## Children Playing with Others, a Mother's Story

*Melissa Briggs*

### Introduction

I watched my 4-year-old son play at a playground. He was joyful and happy in his play. He squealed with laughter as he slid down the slide. He played alone and did not seem to mind at the time. He focused on the slide, and around and around he went. A few moments later, he caught the eye of a ball that rolled by. He ran after it, and so did the other children. He did not want to share; they did not include him, and he did not know what steps to take next. He stood there for a moment, unsure, and then moved to something different. I watched from afar, reflecting on how important it was for my child to play and how important it needed to be with others sometimes. Our son is neurodivergent, and he tends to play alone. He is happy playing alone, and I am not particularly eager to disrupt his happiness. However, I know his playing is missing a key aspect, which includes some of the play's most incredible superpowers. He needs to practice playing to connect with others, build bonds, and learn negotiation and engagement skills. Others need to play with him to know about differences, challenge their own beliefs, experience other perspectives, and learn negotiation and engagement skills to challenge their own beliefs, experience other perspectives, and to experience other perspectives, and also to learn negotiation and engagement.

All children deserve to play. Including all children in play is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging, promoting social inclusion, and supporting the overall development of each child.

### Conclusion

Including all children in play is essential for promoting diversity, fostering empathy, enhancing social skills, building self-esteem, and creating inclusive communities where every child feels valued, respected, and supported. It benefits not only the individual children but also society. By implementing these strategies, you can create a play environment where all children feel valued, included, and empowered to participate fully in play activities.



## Overcoming Play Barriers: Fostering Uninterrupted Play for WHOLE Child Development

*Adrienne Hofmann M.Ed.*

### Introduction

Children are wired to be outdoors. Richard Louv (2005), the guru of all things nature, reminds us that when children are out in the wild, they're not just having fun but learning some serious life skills. Think negotiation, problem-solving, and teamwork - all happening during good ol' unstructured playtime.

But guess what? Instead of being chill hummingbird caregivers and teachers, we have become more like helicopter parents in our approach to children's learning experiences. The product-driven culture within our education system has minimized the inherent risks of childhood and replaced them with an abundance of extracurricular activities. This shift has made childhood less about the child and more about achieving goals set by parents and teachers.

### Conclusion

Recognizing play's multifaceted benefits, encompassing cognitive, social, and emotional development, highlights the necessity of prioritizing play in educational settings (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Purvis, 2008). Several key strategies and initiatives can be employed to implement a more play-based, child-centered approach effectively.

Educational Initiatives seek to empower educators with play-based learning strategies through teacher training and ongoing professional development, while mentorship programs facilitate the exchange of best practices. Simultaneously, Policy Changes are essential for prioritizing play and supporting child-led learning. These changes include incorporating natural elements into playgrounds, promoting controlled risk-taking, and mandating outdoor playtime during school hours, combining unstructured play with nature ensures children benefit from holistic development.

## The Child's Right to Play

*Olga S. Jarrett*

### Introduction

In the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the world has recognized that the rights of the child include the right to play. That right is the foundation for this White Paper, identifying areas of action that promote the child's right to play.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a treaty that the U.S. delegation helped to write during the 1980s under the Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations. It was unanimously adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1989 and signed by the U.S. in 1995 during the Clinton administration (Todres et al., 2006). The Convention spells out 40 substantive human rights to which children are entitled (Lichtsinn et al., 2023), including rights to a name and nationality, protection from violence and neglect, and care by parents unless endangering the child. It also protects against child labor, illicit drug trafficking, sexual exploitation, participation in armed conflict under the age of 15, and capital punishment or life imprisonment without possibility of parole. Among the 54 articles is Article 31, identifying play as a fundamental right of the child.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is an important part of the history of I.P.A. World since I.P.A. made recommendations for Article 31 and advocated for General Comment #17 (United Nations, 2013), a description of the meaning of the right to play. Article 31 states:

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the child's age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational, and leisure activity.

By signing, the U.S. indicated its intention to ratify the treaty. However, because the Convention on the Rights of the Child is an international treaty, according to the U.S. Constitution, it needs to be ratified by two-thirds of the Senate (Todres et al., 2006). So far, 196 countries have ratified the Convention, leaving the U.S. as the only nation that has not yet done so. This treaty has not even been introduced in the Senate. By not ratifying the Convention, the U.S. is not a member of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the international body that monitors implementation. According to Lichtsinn et al. (2023), the failure to ratify has contributed to "poor health outcomes for American children in comparison to other high-income countries" as well as "other social inequities."

## Conclusion

The U.S. cannot assume that American children's right to play is protected (Jarrett et al. (2023). Research shows that deprivation of the child's right to play exists in schools when sufficient recess is not allowed, in the juvenile justice system when recreation is minimized, when appropriate childcare is unaffordable, when poor neighborhoods lack well-maintained parks and playgrounds, and when screen time substitutes for play. However, given the political situation, it is not likely that the Convention on the Rights of the Child would be approved by 2/3 of the U.S. Senate.

IPAUSA and other organizations supporting this white paper can collaborate to advocate for the child's right to play, which needs to be supported, whether or not the U.S. becomes a state party to this important Convention on the Rights of the Child. This informative white paper includes the following general topics with background and recommendations for actions that can be taken to protect the child's right to play:

- Children's rights identified
- Play across the lifespan

- Play as a biological necessity
- Readiness explored
- The need for breaks
- The importance of experiences in nature
- The healing power of play
- The economics of play

## **Play and Social Justice**

*Olga Jarrett*

### **Introduction**

This white paper explores the following issues of social justice: availability and length of recess, quality of school playgrounds, availability of community parks and playgrounds, play opportunities for children with disabilities, availability of culturally appropriate play and learning materials such as books and dolls, affordability of children's museums and other museums and zoos, school punishment policies, play opportunities in detention centers, and play opportunities in children's hospitals. Much of the material in this white paper is condensed from Jarrett, Stenhouse, Sutterby, & Patte (2023). In the book, *In a Test-driven Culture, is it still OK to play?* It is relevant because play and social justice are the book's themes.

### **Conclusion**

The bottom line is that children of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds should have the opportunity and encouragement to learn in physically, intellectually, and socially active ways. Play is an important and essential part of that learning, and cultural differences in play should be respected. A multicultural nation benefits from encouraging children to play together across racial and socioeconomic differences. Ensuring access to playgrounds, parks, museums, libraries, zoos, and recess are viewed through the lens of equity is necessary to create spaces where all children can play.

## Equity in Play: Ensuring Inclusive Play and Learning for All Children

*Cindy Lee and Alexa Poyner*

### Introduction

Ensuring equitable access for every student to inclusive play continues to be a crucial challenge in education. Despite growing research on the importance of inclusive play in fostering social-emotional growth and improving educational outcomes, significant disparities continue to hinder access to playful learning for all. This issue is multifaceted, including physical barriers in play spaces, social exclusion due to stigmatization or lack of awareness, and inadequate support systems for children with diverse needs. Without proactive measures to address these challenges, many children, particularly those with disabilities or special needs, continue to encounter exclusion and limited opportunities for meaningful play experiences. Therefore, achieving equitable access to inclusive play will require complex and comprehensive strategies that ensure every child can thrive and participate fully in playful learning.

### Conclusion

Ensuring equitable access to inclusive play for all children requires a multifaceted approach that addresses physical, social, and systemic barriers. Implementing Universal Design principles in play spaces can help create environments that are welcoming and accessible to children of all abilities, supporting their overall development and fostering a sense of community. These spaces should include various play options, appealing to different senses and developmental stages and providing opportunities for safe and stimulating play experiences. Creating inclusive play environments promotes social interaction, cooperation, and acceptance among children from diverse backgrounds and abilities.

To achieve equitable play opportunities, stakeholders must collaborate and advocate for policies and practices prioritizing inclusivity in play spaces. This includes consulting with experts and families to understand the needs of children with disabilities and creating accessible pathways, equipment, and play structures. Educators and parents can play

critical roles in modeling inclusive behaviors and encouraging children to embrace diversity in play. Additionally, involving children in the planning process can help ensure that play spaces reflect their preferences and interests. By taking these actions, we can create inclusive play environments that allow every child to thrive and learn through play, leading to a more equitable and supportive society.

## The Playwork Approach to Supporting Play

*Dr. Shelly Newstead*

### Introduction

One of the most interesting and yet perhaps frustrating issues for play advocates and professionals is that 'play' can be understood and is defined in so many different ways. Adults imbue a deceptively simple word describing children's activity with a whole panoply of conflicting (often competing) rationales, aims, and outcomes. Apparently, innocuous phrases like 'supporting play' become fraught with confusion and debates about the 'right' or 'best' way for adults to support play, fueled by different understandings of the nature and purpose of play.

In its 70+ years, the UK playwork field has never shied away from debates and disagreements amongst itself (Williams, 1986). However, when it comes to play, playworkers and playwork practitioners generally agree that play is an activity that should be defined and driven by children themselves. While this understanding of play is defined differently by different schools of playwork, it does provide the basis of a common approach to the adult role in terms of 'supporting play.' This paper presents two fundamental playwork theories which enable playwork practitioners to focus on the playwork version of play.

### Conclusion

The playwork approach to play as a process that should be defined and driven by children does not suit all adults or settings. As noted at the start of this paper, there are many different interpretations of the word 'play'; none can be seen as more or less valid than the others. However, for those who prioritize children's ability to make their own decisions about why, how, and when they play, Hughes' Play Types and Sturrock and Else's Play Cycle theory are useful theories that could be more widely used by practitioners and those who educate and them to support play.



It is also the case that these pillars of playwork play are becoming dated and could be revisited and further developed, especially in terms of their practical application for supporting children's play. Neither the Play Cycle nor Play Types are directly supported by empirical evidence. However, a lot of play literature could be drawn on in addition to developing new empirical studies. Practical guidance is limited and scattered throughout academic literature and various textbooks, many of which are not easily accessible to practitioners or are outdated. Critiques of both theories would also help develop new playwork knowledge about how adults can support children's play without imposing adult outcomes or agendas. For example, the existence and nature of 'play cues' have been disputed in the play literature (Smith, 2009). However, this debate is not currently reflected in contemporary playwork literature, where theories are generally treated as factual guides to practice rather than well-developed ideas that might (or might not) shed new light on existing problems.

This White Paper on the playwork approach to supporting children's play, therefore, concludes with two recommendations:

1. That adults interested in children's play are familiar with Hughes' Taxonomy of Play Types and Sturrock and Else's Play Cycle theory
2. Playwork practitioners and academics interested in supporting children's play consider Hughes' Taxonomy of Play Types and Sturrock and Else's Play Cycle theory as areas for future academic and practical literature development.

## Nature is Essential

This series of articles, dedicated to the child’s right to play in nature, discusses perceived barriers and fears and provides researched evidence on the importance of play in nature, from equity access to how nature fosters development, which includes a host of strategies that can be personalized for your program.

### Authors

#### **Playing in Nature**

Elizabeth Boileau

#### **Nature Play: Early Childhood and Beyond**

Victoria Carr and Claire C. Underwood

#### **Equitable Access to Nature-Based Play Through Public Policy -**

Isaac Castillo, Senior Advisor – Learning and Evaluation, KABOOM!  
Monica Lopez Magee, Senior Vice President - Programs, Research, & Policy, Children & Nature Network  
David Beard, Director of Policy & Government Affairs, Children & Nature Network

#### **Responsible Nature Play**

Peter Dargatz

#### **The Power of Nature Play for Children**

Rachel Larimore

#### **How Does the Environment Impact Play**

Kim Moroney

#### **The Joy of Nature-Based Teaching in Duluth, Minnesota**

Christina Wild

## Playing in Nature

*Dr. Elizabeth Y. S. Boileau, Assistant Professor,  
Center for Environmental Education, University of Minnesota Duluth*

### Introduction

Play is considered an important contributor to children's healthy development. Play allows children to move with their bodies, engage in social interactions, learn about the world, use their imagination, problem-solve, and process feelings. Playing outside in a natural environment offers children many additional health and developmental benefits, such as the ability to stimulate children's senses in an integrated way, which can have a therapeutic impact (Cree & Robb, 2021).

Yet, compared to a few decades ago, children's time engaging in outdoor play has greatly decreased, both within early childhood education programs and at home (Dietze & Kashin, 2019). Many children do not have regular access to an outdoor play environment, or their parents and caregivers may not value nature play as an essential part of childhood. Additionally, urgent attention and action are needed to address environmental crises such as the loss of biodiversity, climate change, and pollution. As part of achieving sustainability goals, children must develop a strong attachment to natural places during their formative years. Positive experiences playing in nature in the early years inform children's environmental identity and values and thus could contribute to achieving education for sustainability goals set by the United Nations (UNESCO, n.d.).

### Conclusion

Regular, repeated time spent in nature allows children to feel in tune with their local environment, gain a sense of place and belonging, and develop an understanding of natural processes and cycles. Playing outside in nature also has positive effects, such as opportunities for imaginative play, adventurous play, risky play, and social and cultural learning. Outdoor play should be promoted both at home and in the classroom as an essential part of childhood and one of the ways for society to move towards a sustainable future. Recommendations include increased access to nature-based early

childhood programs for all children, equitable access to green spaces such as urban parks and large parks, and an emphasis on sustainability and environmental conservation education.

## Nature Play: Early Childhood and Beyond

Victoria Carr and Claire C. Underwood  
University of Cincinnati

### Introduction

Systematic literature reviews affirm that the natural world presents play opportunities with cognitive, social, creative, physical, emotional, and biophilic benefits (Johnstone et al., 2022; Mann et al., 2022). Research also suggests that play in nature enhances spatial working memory (Torquati et al., 2017), cultivates executive functions (Carr et al., 2017; Ernst & Burcak, 2019), underpins early science learning (Gomes & Fler, 2020), and fosters environmental identities and stewardship (DeVillie et al., 2021). Grounded in evidence for positive developmental, environmental, and educational outcomes (Burgess & Ernst, 2020; Bruner et al., 1976; Chawla, 2015), nature-based early learning programs have grown by 300% since 2010; 200% since 2017 (NAAEE, 2023). High-level nature-based pedagogies are transformative; teachers view children as agentic and engage in co-discovery of environmental phenomena (Kochanowski et al., in press). From an Indigenous perspective, reverence and gratitude toward the natural world encourage us to embrace our collective connectedness to and responsibility for the natural world, cultivating symbiotic relationships (Kimmerer, 2020). These modalities have been adopted by advocates for early childhood education for sustainability (Davis et al., in press). They are most evident in nature preschools where children spend most, if not all, of the school day outdoors.

### Conclusion

Childhood experiences of nature clearly create bonds with the natural environment (Hinds & Spark, 2011). In *Making Nature Personal*, O'Connor (2013) describes how children who were actively engaged in nature center activities when young disappear in their youth, only to return as adults. How about we encourage nature play throughout our lives?

- *Uplift the importance of unstructured nature play.* Play is too often relegated to early childhood, yet it is important across the lifespan. We must normalize

and affirm that children of all ages in all places have the right to play – with space and opportunity to exercise agency, curiosity, imagination, risk-taking, and executive functions.

- *Cultivate our own connection to nature.* Nature inspires recreation, environmentalism, hobbies (such as gardening), and spiritual connections. We nurture and model our connectedness for children and our wider communities through respectful engagement within the natural world. Play need not be contained to childhood.
- *Make time for nature play.* Encourage children to go outdoors to play without unnecessary adult constraints. Find or create nature-rich environments replete with natural loose parts that are flexible and engaging. Experience nature play alongside children and youth in all kinds of weather; it encourages new perspectives.
- *Support and encourage adolescents to explore the outdoors.* Encourage adolescents to disconnect from technology and spend time outdoors—in a nature-rich setting rather than a sports field. Spend time in nature as a family. Advocate for the greening of schoolyards, recess, environmental education, and nature camps.

Nature play and experiences in and with nature are unique to each person. A salient point about playing outdoors is that an omnipresent affinity for living things that binds us to nature, or biophilia, generates positive feelings (Wilson, 1984), but for some, nature, such as perceived threats within a dense wilderness, can also evoke biophobia (Olivas-Jara et al., 2020). Yet, when we are open to experiencing nature ourselves and inviting children to play in nature, we access a world of possibility, connection, and play that, as Dewey (1929) posits, is what it is.

## Equitable Access to Nature-Based Play Through Public Policy

*Isaac Castillo, Senior Advisor – Learning and Evaluation, KABOOM!*

*Monica Lopez Magee, Senior Vice President - Programs, Research, & Policy, Children & Nature Network*

*David Beard, Director of Policy & Government Affairs, Children & Nature Network*

### Introduction

Across the ages and in every culture, childhood has included time playing in and exploring the outdoors. This time spent playing in nature is not only fun and a place of fond memories but also has [many benefits](#), from strong social connections to increased physical activity, improved mental health, better preparation for school, and a love and care for the environment. A logical conclusion is that every child should have daily outdoor opportunities and reap these benefits.

While nature and outdoor recreational opportunities may seem freely accessible to everyone, certain groups can access these open spaces more easily than others. Throughout most of the United States, higher-income white families tend to be closer to higher-quality and easier-to-access outdoor spaces than lower-income communities and communities of color. Frequently, these differences are rooted in decisions made decades ago that prioritized affluent and predominately white neighborhoods for nature and outdoor access.

In 2020, the [Center for American Progress](#) (CAP) authored a [report](#) that found the United States has fewer forests, streams, wetlands, and other natural places near where Black, Latino, and Asian American people live. Notably, families with children — especially families of color with children — have less access to nature nearby than the rest of the country. In other words, families in these communities are nature-deprived. The report explains that this discrepancy in access to nature is not a happenstance; it is a direct result of systemic racism.

## Conclusion

Solutions for creating equitable access to nature exist in partnership with communities and government. Cities, states, tribal governments, and the federal government all play critical convening, policy, and funding roles in collaboration with various sectors, including health, parks, education, youth development, early learning, sustainability and resilience, and outdoor recreation. Creating systemic change with communities of color in a co-leading capacity in visioning, design, and implementation will help ensure equitable access to nature. We can design a world where all children, regardless of race or location, play in the outdoors daily to experience the benefits of nature and build fond memories that last a lifetime.



## Playing in Nature

*Peter Dargatz*

### Introduction

Mountains of research prove that there should be no debate on the value of nature play in healthy whole-child development. Nature play takes the positive benefits of play to the next level. Playing in nature will not automatically solve every problem or instantly make everything better, but the research does not lie. Playing in nature improves skills necessary for academic success, self-regulation, and executive functioning, and it is tied to improved health and increased happiness.

### Conclusion

Children (and adults) like going off the trail to explore and discover new things. Experiencing nature off-trail invites sensory experiences that bring play to the next level. Children love picking flowers. They treasure trailblazing. They enjoy experimenting with a branch's flexibility. Going off-trail is memorable and meaningful, but it is also controversial. Do the risks of going off-trail outweigh the benefits? Are there hazards? Is the area in question ecologically vulnerable? Will the actions and activities associated with going off-trail leave lasting ecological impacts on the land? When you are playing outside of your yard or space, the expectations of that location must be respected. With some common sense and basic education in respecting the environment, going off-trail is an excellent element in responsible nature play.

Responsible nature play is not simply opening the door and sending children outside until the streetlights come on—it is a collaborative effort between children and adults.

## The Power of Nature Play for Children

Rachel Larimore

### Introduction

Nature provides a seemingly endless number of open-ended materials for children, making the play rich with possibilities. Not only does nature provide a plethora of materials for children to play *with*, but nature also provides a powerful backdrop for children's play. A backdrop that has incredible implications for children's physical, social-emotional, and cognitive health—as well as their connection with the natural world. We know play is powerful, a point our other white papers in this series highlight. However, play is even more powerful when it happens *in* (i.e., outside) and *with* nature (e.g., playing with a stick).

The setting—or playing *in* nature—takes children's play to an entirely new level for their happiness, growth, and development. Many of these impacts are separate from the kind of play children are engaged with. For example, one child might be creating a miniature imaginary world out of acorn tops and leaves while another child is building a massive rock wall. Yet, both are immersed in the sensory-rich world of nature. Both are getting natural light into their eyes and on their skin, helping their eyes to develop and their body to absorb Vitamin D. So, while their brain is busy creating stories, their heart is busy connecting to themselves and their friends, their body is growing because they are simply *in* nature rather than being disconnected from nature indoors.

To expand on the idea that nature play 'levels up' children's learning, let us explore the growing evidence that suggests nature play, or play that occurs *in* and *with* nature, positively impacts children's development.

### Conclusion

We know that play is powerful in and of itself. There is strong evidence that play, which occurs *in* and *with* nature, is beneficial to every domain of children's development. Thus,

supporting children's access to nature play is critical for their well-being as well as for the care of the planet. Children's access to nature play is strongly influenced by three factors: routes to get to play spaces, features of the play spaces, and social settings and interactions (Gemmell et al., 2023). How might we provide children with more nature play spaces that are rich with space, time, and social interactions?

As we consider the power of play, let us also consider how play, both *in* and *with* nature can help children thrive in living full, rich lives where their entire being—physical, cognitive, and social-emotional—is nurtured.

## How Does the Environment Impact Play

*Kim Moroney*

### Introduction

The environment serves as a dynamic and evolving context which impacts play. Environments influentially enable and enrich play, or diversely, environments can constrain and obstruct play. A nuanced understanding of environments elevates the positive impact on play and calls upon the need for thoughtful observation, consideration, decision-making, and reflection.

The environment is not, nor can it be, a replication of somewhere or something else. It exists in time in a particular context and in relationship with the people in that space. It does not exist in isolation. It is part of the school's culture and reflects community values. Such understandings require a commitment to Early Childhood philosophies, theories, pedagogy, and evidence-based practice.

### Conclusion

The environment is forever evolving and influenced by stakeholders such as children, educators, teachers, families, and community members. It aims to inspire a sense of wonder and awe about the world. The environment provides an aesthetic of engagement, meaning, beauty, and joy! It enables and enriches learning, development, well-being, and play. It welcomes and entices! It invites and provokes! The environment whispers and often shouts to the child, come play!

## The Joy of Nature-Based Teaching in Duluth, Minnesota

*Christina Wild*

### Introduction

Public school teachers across the United States face high burnout and attrition, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and challenging work conditions. In Duluth, Minnesota, a city known for appreciating the outdoors, nature-based education (NBE) and outdoor play have emerged as potential solutions to address these issues.

In previous research (see Ernst, 2007; Ardoin & Bowers, 2020), the benefits of NBE for students have been well-documented. However, this researcher looked at the impact of NBE on educators. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of nature-based educators in Duluth is one step toward addressing teacher burnout and retention challenges using NBE.

Nature-based Education (NBE) encompasses various pedagogical approaches rooted in outdoor experiences and environmental stewardship. Despite its growing popularity, particularly among early childhood educators, its impact on teacher outcomes still needs to be explored. Research suggests that NBE can contribute to positive teacher outcomes, including job satisfaction and retention. However, there is a need for a more in-depth exploration of the experiences of nature-based educators, particularly in communities like Duluth, where outdoor culture is prominent.

### Conclusion

The findings of this research highlight the deep-rooted passion for NBE among educators in Duluth despite the challenges they may face. To support teacher retention and job satisfaction, policymakers and school leaders should prioritize the creation of supportive environments for nature-based educators. This includes recognizing the unique contributions of these educators, providing resources for professional development, and fostering a culture of sustainability and well-being in the education system. Moving forward, efforts to promote NBE should center on the needs and perspectives of educators, ensuring that they are valued and supported.

## Play as a Biological Necessity

All children are born with an inborn need to play. Play is not recreation; it is essential to development. Through play, children acquire foundational skills and abilities as they grow older. Play is a psychological, biological, and social necessity, fundamental to healthy development across all domains: cognitive, social, emotional, fine motor, gross motor, and language. These developmental domains are interrelated and interdependent. This category of articles supports the need for play and provides you with recommendations, strategies, and research to advocate for play.

IPA World and IPA USA define play as *being the work of childhood. PLAY is communication and expression, combining thought and action; it gives satisfaction and a feeling of achievement. PLAY is instinctive, voluntary, and spontaneous. PLAY is a means of learning to live, not a mere passing of time.*

### Authors

#### **How Does the Environment Impact Play**

Beverly Alford

#### **Art as a Vehicle for Learning**

Jessica Borowets

#### **Risks vs. Hazards**

Peter Dargatz

#### **Nature-Based and Manufactured Playgrounds: The Need for Diversity in Play Environments**

Brianna Marr OTD, OTR/L

**Redefining Basic Needs: Eliminating Systemic Barriers to Ensure Every Child  
Can Thrive**

By Kisa Marx & Emily Clark, M.Ed.

**How Does the Rhythm of the Day Set the State for Play**

Rhonda Pollock

## How the Environment Impacts Play

Beverly L. Alford, PhD | [alfordb@uhd.edu](mailto:alfordb@uhd.edu)

### Introduction

Despite rich evidentiary research data demonstrating play's critical role in young children's lives by supporting healthy development and learning, play is often saddled with the erroneous characterization of being *frivolous*. The National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) position statement on developmentally appropriate practice recognizes and describes the importance of play and uses the term *self-directed play* to refer to play that is initiated and directed by children. A young child's environment is essential in supporting play and should be intended and designed to foster and encourage a variety of play experiences—both indoors and outdoors.

### Conclusion

Maria Montessori cautioned that a child has a different relation to his environment from ours: The child absorbs it. The things a child sees are not just remembered; they form part of his soul (Montessori, 1961). The environment, therefore, is crucial in shaping the way children play. Creating environments that are safe, stimulating, and supportive of exploration and social interaction enhances children's play and promotes holistic development.



## **Art as a Vehicle for Learning: The Necessity of Creative Environments Through the Early Years**

*Jessica Borowets*

### **Introduction**

In early childhood education, a gradual shift is happening towards acknowledging the importance of nurturing young minds through a “whole child” curriculum. There seems to be a buzz about the significance of all aspects of a child's development beyond academic achievement. Parents and educators are finally considering the overall well-being and growth of the child. However, a lack of understanding persists regarding the crucial role of art and creative environments in facilitating deeper and more meaningful learning experiences during the early years. Art is seen as an extracurricular activity and is often confused with product-focused crafts. A rich environment is overlooked as an ideal tool for a child to construct meaning and understanding about their world. The results are a restricted curriculum and ho-hum classrooms that negate the needs of young children, ignoring the potential of a material-rich environment and what it can offer for child development.

### **Conclusion**

Art and an artistic environment serve as a powerful vehicle for learning in a child's early years by engaging them in meaningful experiences, provoking thought, and promoting overall development. By embracing a child-centric approach, integrating art into the curriculum, and keeping an intentionally interesting, inspiring space, the learning process can be enriched in many ways. Spreading the word and advocating for child-initiated play is a way to engage policy-makers, teachers, and parents in recognizing why play is critical to development. If there are more advocates for including art in early childhood education, adults can cease limiting children's potential with their own agenda and expected outcomes. In doing so, we will support every child's potential, preparing them to thrive in this increasingly complex and interconnected world.

## **Risk Vs. Hazards in Play**

*Peter Dargatz*

### **Introduction**

Risk and hazards are often considered synonymous. They are not. In fact, they couldn't be more different. Hazards need to be identified and avoided, while risks are meant to be encouraged and celebrated.

### **Conclusion**

Risky play in education is an important element of a successful school experience. Risk inspires self-confidence and resiliency. Successfully navigating risky situations is imperative to improving skills that are crucial to academic development, including problem-solving and executive functioning.

## Nature-Based and Manufactured Playgrounds: The Need for Diversity in Play Environments

*Brianna Marr OTD, OTR/L*

### Introduction

Although many may agree that natural environments can provide rich experiences for all ages, access to green/blue spaces or open natural areas is inequitable. Rigolon (2016) explicitly identifies inequities in park acreage, amenities, safety, and proximity when comparing low-SES neighborhoods with more affluent neighborhoods in urban settings. Acknowledging the right of every person, especially children, to have equitable access to quantity, quality, and diversity of play experiences must also include natural play spaces (nature-based playgrounds, green spaces, blue spaces, etc.). With this belief in mind, we ask, what is the quantifiable value in increasing access to these diverse play experiences and environments? Why does that matter?

### Conclusion

Children prefer their play experiences in nature-based playgrounds as this environment offers them more freedom and autonomy. It is continuously adaptable to support the creation of new play experiences with natural materials, loose parts, and parts and encourages creative problem-solving and vital social interactions. The children are engaged in this play environment for longer. They are leaving the play experiences with decreased negative valence emotions because they have used the natural aspects provided to create their own fulfilling play experience that meets their desires and needs. So, why does this matter? With longer and richer play experiences, children are deriving more benefits from their play physically, mentally, socially, emotionally, and developmentally. As an occupational therapist, I recognize that children are maximizing their participation, performance, and satisfaction in their primary occupation, play.

This is important as it provides a backbone for advocating for equitable quality, quantity, and diversity in play environments and experiences for all. This data emphasizes the importance of accessibility to these experiences by addressing barriers: physical,

social-emotional, financial, and geographic. When we can acknowledge the value of play for all and the value of diversity and equity in play, we can work meaningfully as play advocates, play facilitators, and community teammates.

# **Redefining Basic Needs: Eliminating Systemic Barriers to Ensure Every Child Can Thrive**

*By Kisa Marx & Emily Clark, M.Ed*

## **Introduction**

Hardworking teachers, driven by love and dedication, find themselves unwittingly complicit in a system that fails to address the unique needs of children from the global majority. Their lack of cultural responsiveness and anti-bias competence leaves them ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of their students' experiences. Consequently, a disheartening reality emerges: the very institutions intended to nurture and educate our children may inadvertently contribute to a preschool-to-prison pipeline, perpetuating cycles of inequality and injustice.

## **Conclusion**

The journey towards a more equitable and compassionate future for early childhood education demands a paradigm shift away from the deficit model towards humanizing pedagogies that center the genius, justice, love, and humanity in our children.

Hardworking teachers, driven by love and dedication, often find themselves unwittingly complicit in a system that fails to address the unique needs of children from the global majority. The lack of cultural responsiveness and anti-bias competence leaves these educators ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of their students' experiences, inadvertently contributing to cycles of inequality and injustice.

We've been conditioned by societal norms to view the world through a lens fractured by deficits, triggering reactive decisions based on fear instead of what is informed by the child's development. This is particularly pronounced in the lives of Black children, who often face compounded challenges due to systemic racism and inequities.

Dr. Ghouldy Muhammad's call for humanizing pedagogies resonates deeply. It emphasizes the need to recognize the intrinsic value of every child and the collective responsibility to provide high-quality care for all families, regardless of income.

Advocating for systemic change at every level, we must ensure that every child has the inherent right to safety, joy, and a sense of belonging in their learning environments.

## How Does the Rhythm of the Day Set the State for Play

*Rhonda Pollock*

### Introduction

For those familiar with Waldorf Education, you will know about the "breathing in" and "breathing out" periods in a school day. These terms simply mean there are times throughout the day for 'quiet' activities and additionally for 'louder' more physical activities.

When there is a predictable routine in school or home life, there is a flow to the day that children come to expect, and that feels natural and safe, the same way it does for all animals; we have periods of rest and periods of activity, which is part of the natural Circadian Rhythm and if we can follow this natural rhythm and allow children the freedom to rest when needed and to be active/play when needed children can grow and develop without the stress of being rushed from activity to activity for the sake of "learning" or to meet an educational goal that is meant to be a measurable learning outcome.

### Conclusion

We respect childhood's natural pace when we set the stage for play each day and allow periods of unstructured free play during a child's day. In addition, we are providing an opportunity for children to release the natural bursts of physical energy that is within their bodies. Educators can set the stage for play each day by providing a familiar flow or rhythm to their day that children will come to expect. It does not need to be rigid to specific time slots but rather to a natural flow each day so that children will come to know their day-to-day schedule. As children age, grow, and develop, their play will also look different; however, we must take a stand and

acknowledge and advocate that they need periods of play as a human right throughout the entire span of childhood into adulthood. As adults, we continue to play in ways that look different but are nonetheless crucial for our physical, emotional, and psychological

well-being. A work/life balance is one that is harmonious with periods of rest/work/play. Humans cannot only exist for the sake of producing and working, or we end up with feelings of 'dis-ease' and with physical and mental health issues/'disease.' In addition, research has shown that after a period of play, children and adults can more easily focus on a period of schoolwork. Research has shown that even a ten-minute break from schoolwork can reset the mind to recover from cognitive fatigue.



## Play Across the Lifespan

This category of articles addresses the need and benefits of play for infants through play in the aging population. Regardless of the age group you work with, the wealth of research to support play and recommendations for advocacy are clearly outlined so that you can advocate for everyone's right to play.

### Authors

#### **The Transformative Power of Self-Active Play for Adults**

Carly Bedard

#### **The Transformative Power of Adult Play in Early Childhood Education Programs**

Miriam Beloglovsky

#### **College Students Need to Play Too: Understanding the Issues and Possibilities within College-Aged Play**

Steph Dean and Julianne Wenner

#### **Playing with the Big Kids: Nurturing Connection and Creativity Among College Students**

Tabitha Dell 'Angelo

#### **Airborne Rocks and Downed Block Structures: Is it Challenging Behavior or Toddlers at Play**

Bethene Edwards, M.S.

#### **Playful Service Learning: Playful Service Learning: Making University Courses More Engaging**

Joyce Hemphill, Laura Scheinholtz, Heather Von Bank

**The Power of Play: Nurturing Self-Regulation in Children**

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**Preparing Teachers for Playful Learning**

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**Play Across the Lifespan – Defining Play – Play with the Primary Grades**

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**From Kindergarten to College Play**

Andrea Sanchez

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Dorothy Sluss, PhD

**Decoding the Collegiate Mental Health Crisis: Embracing Playful Pedagogy and Valuing Playful Campuses-**

Lauren Sundstrom

**Bringing Play Back to Middle School: Bringing Play Back to Middle School: How Board Games Boost Learning and Emotional Growth:**

Joseph Yaure

**Play with College Students**

Bernadette Zermeño

## Self Active

*Carly Bedard*

### Introduction

This paper explores the protocols of self-active play, which entails hands-on play experiences for adults that engage the hands, heart, and mind and remind us of the joy of playing as children. It is intended to help educators, leaders, families, and legislators understand self-active play, the critical need for open-ended self-active play experiences, and how the self-active play experience can be integrated into professional development for early childhood.

### Conclusion

By experiencing the power of play firsthand, adults can understand the importance of inviting children to engage in various play experiences. They can also reexamine their role in children's play and become more cognizant of providing children the time and space to engage in self-active play. Integrating opportunities for self-active play during professional development, in college courses, and during staff meetings are practical and viable steps for caregivers to experience the incredible benefits of play. Providing a few moments to engage in open-ended play regularly will benefit our current and future early childhood workforce immensely. Integrating play spaces at conferences where attendees can freely explore and engage with open-ended play materials provides a powerful opportunity to foster wellness, creativity, and joy in early childhood.

# The Transformative Power of Adult Play in Early Childhood Education Programs

*Miriam Beloglovsky*

## Introduction

In a world where achievement is often measured through quantitative output, the emotional and creative aspects of the educational vocation have been neglected. This white paper argues that reintroducing play as a fundamental aspect of an educator's experience can dramatically improve their professional and personal lives. Increasing the value educators place in play can reignite their passion for teaching and promoting the pedagogy of care.

As early childhood educators, we are experiencing an identity crisis. We have worked hard to gain recognition for our work and achieve higher compensation. We are also constantly pushed to join practices that compromise the values we hold close to our hearts—the values of play, joy, creativity, empathy, and compassion. Yes, we want professional recognition, and we also want to advocate for what we know is best for young children. We want to embrace our creativity and adopt the pedagogies of play and care, which we understand can sustain and change children's lives.

## Conclusion

Integrating adult play within early childhood education settings offers a robust means of enhancing educator satisfaction, creativity, and retention. By acknowledging and acting upon the value of play, educational leaders can cultivate an environment that not only supports the well-being of educators but also enriches the learning experiences of our society's youngest members. This white paper advocates for a reimagined approach to early childhood education—one where play is recognized as a powerful agent for change, facilitating a thriving community of educators and learners.

## **College Students Need to Play Too: Understanding the Issues and Possibilities within College-Aged Play**

*Steph Dean and Julianne Wenner*

### **Introduction**

It is widely recognized that play is critical to the development of young children (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020), but this is also true for young adults (see Forbes, 2021; James, 2019; Leather et al., 2021). College-aged individuals can benefit from regular play as part of their day-to-day experiences, and many of the positive outcomes are similar to what is evident in younger children. When college students participate in play, they can experience a reduction in stress, enhanced creativity, increased academic performance/learning, authentic connections with peers, greater motivation and engagement, and an overall improved mood (Forbes, 2021; Gordon, 2014; Leather et al., 2021; Pang & Proyer, 2018; Togsverd & Pedersen, 2024). It has also been noted that playful adults live approximately ten years longer than less playful adults (Gordon, 2014). Despite these benefits, compared to younger children, there is not much research examining play in college students, particularly within certain countries and/or cultures (Yue et al., 2016).

### **Conclusion**

Data and evidence should drive colleges and universities. As such, more empirical research demonstrating the benefits of play and play-based learning at the college level is warranted. In addition to describing benefits, researchers should clearly explain interventions used, programs created, and methods used to measure outcomes; this increases the likelihood that others will see the generalizability of these activities and trust the research findings. Further, researchers should explore what play looks like at the college level worldwide, as there may be lessons to learn from other systems and cultures.

College students need to play, and it is critical to their development as human beings. The positive outcomes are holistic in nature and include benefits related to physical, social, and emotional well-being.

## Playing with the Big Kids: Nurturing Connection and Creativity Among College Students

*Tabitha Dell 'Angelo*

### Introduction

When I first became a college professor, I prided myself on bringing playfulness into my teaching. In my courses, we created and played games to help with content learning. We did improv games to elaborate on concepts and take the role of theorists, acted out timelines, did crossword puzzles, and laughed and learned. Many students told me how they found material easier to remember, discuss, and apply because of this approach to learning. I even had a few students graduate and become teachers and then reach out to tell me they also implemented playful methods into their classes. Then, one semester, when I asked for informal feedback about the class, a student said, "We need more power points." I was crushed.

### Conclusion

College is a unique time in a person's life. College students are at once children and adults. They may be working very diligently on a paper or in a lab and then leaving to throw a frisbee around, participate in intramural sports, or just be silly together. It is a liminal space between where there is real value in being at once childlike and adultlike. Those of us who work with college students have the unique opportunity to encourage playfulness and demonstrate that there is a place for an incredible value to creativity and play across the lifespan.

## Airborne Rocks and Downed Block Structures: Is it Challenging Behavior or Toddlers at Play

*Bethene Edwards- M.S. ECE*

### Introduction

Often, parents and educators misunderstand infants and toddlers at play. A block or stick is thrown, and the adult corrects the action, assuming it is random behavior. The parent or caregiver might ask, why is my toddler dumping toys and materials all over the room after I have just cleaned it up? Another adult might question why their toddler spins in circles repeatedly or why that same toddler pours milk into their mashed potatoes. What is happening here?

The answer is that toddlers are at play! When toddlers throw objects, twirl, climb on furniture, and knock over block towers, they engage in important development work in Play Schema. Often, these behaviors are redirected and viewed as negative behaviors when, in fact, they are critical components of cognitive development and constructing knowledge of how the world works. When adults lack an understanding of toddlers at play, these important behaviors are often disrupted and discouraged. Critical learning opportunities are denied to the child. The key to understanding and supporting toddler play is education in play schema.

### Conclusion

Toddler play is best supported by an adult's understanding of play schemas, the role schemas play in cognition, and how to support toddler development. Those who support toddler staff should provide opportunities to observe these schemas in action. They need to help staff recognize that child-initiated play and the development of schemas are more critical than flashcards or other inappropriate activities. They should also help toddler staff acknowledge that much of toddler behavior is related to schema development,

## Playful Service Learning: Making University Courses More Engaging

*Joyce Hemphill, Laura Scheinholz, & Heather Von Bank*

### Introduction

**Play.** It is easy to reminisce about how children play during their school day. Whether they are experimenting with paints and crayons during arts and crafts projects, playing "teacher" while reading to their stuffed animals, or engaging in games of tag at recess, it is more challenging to think about college-aged individuals still needing and benefiting from playful learning. We minimize individuals' need for play as they age and even downgrade the importance of playful inquiry through imagination and creativity in college classes. Further, we know the traditional college classroom where professors "stand and deliver" no longer serves today's students' needs (Freeman et al., 2014).

### Conclusion

While we often think of large lecture halls and hours of listening to professors drone on in college classes, there is no reason those same environments can't be made playful. One particularly rich method for doing this is through service learning. We have provided an example of this application in our play class and PlayDays at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a process later repeated at Minnesota State University-Mankato. Students learned material in a playful way and then brought their new knowledge to the public via different community events. Students partaking in these classes were able to reflect on their experience and how they could bring a more playful attitude to their fields of study and future careers.

There are challenges to changing the college curriculum to include play or playful learning, including finding supportive department chairs and staff, continuing to meet academic standards, and even space and place issues. However, doing a little extra work up front will help educators meet these challenges head-on. While our classes dealt with the topic of play, there is no reason the principles and practices we applied could not be generalized to other fields, as some of our former students have shown.



Even small changes each semester will allow teachers to make their way toward a more playful tomorrow in post-secondary education.

## The Power of Play: Nurturing Self-Regulation in Children

*Sharon Jackson*

### Introduction

This White Paper will explore the relationship between play and self-regulation and provide practical strategies for enhancing it. It will also examine how child-directed play strategies can support and grow self-regulation skills in young children.

### Conclusion

Self-regulation is an essential skill for school and life success. To support children as they mature and learn how to deal with negative situations, disappointment, and challenging interpersonal relationships, adults must start early and serve as strong and resourceful guides for the children around them. Build opportunities regularly for children to discuss and practice self-regulation strategies as appropriate for their age. Offer play scenarios throughout the learning environment for children to experience growing opportunities. Be vigilant throughout the day for situations that might escalate. Allow children to handle challenging circumstances independently but be ready to assist with suggestions without taking over. By modeling healthy responses, ensuring assistance as needed, and creating safe environments, adults can provide essential support as children learn to handle and regulate their emotions.

There are myriad resources for self-regulation support. Among the best and most family-friendly sites is The Inspired Treehouse website, which is listed in the references. It provides a book list and other resources. Written by two occupational therapists, it includes books, games, activities, research, and other helpful pieces for school, center, and home.

## Preparing Teachers

*Deepti Kharod*

### Introduction

Unlike traditional teacher preparation programs that prepare preservice teachers for outcomes-driven education, many teacher educators and some programs integrate playful learning as both a teaching approach and a learning outcome for future teachers (Felton & Cortez-Castro, 2025; Loizou & Trawick-Smith, 2022). This paper advocates for using and teaching playful learning in teacher preparation programs. Various researchers refer to this complex idea using terms such as playful learning, play pedagogy, and play-based teaching and learning. This paper uses playful learning as a broad term to focus attention on the use of play and playfulness in formal learning.

### Conclusion

A common challenge for teacher educators who use playful learning is the experience of isolation. During a recent panel discussion about playful learning in teacher education programs, faculty shared about being the only person or one of few in their department to value play. Several insights were unearthed during those conversations.

The first insight was that many teacher educators have been using play for years in the U.S. and internationally. However, because such work is published across many outlets, teacher educators need to employ various search strategies to find relevant articles, books, and journals to support their professional development.

A related issue is that the broad spectrum of outlets for disseminating this research transcends disciplinary boundaries. Knowing this can help teacher educators look for a professional community and collaboration beyond their education schools to other departments where faculty are engaged in innovative teaching. While some faculty may share their pedagogical research in pedagogy or scholarship of teaching and learning venues, others opt for spaces that focus on their discipline or play research and practice.

## Defining Play – Play with the Primary Grades

*Stephanie Marlett & Joanna Cemore Brigden*

### Introduction

The 20th-century image of children running free with friends for hours is rarely seen anymore. Children's time at and away from school is filled with structured activities, after-school classes, and homework (e.g., Holland et al., 2021; Fischer et al., 2020). On top of that, primary students are given less time for play and recess throughout their school day. Adding to this lack of freedom, some primary schools have eliminated recess, and many who offer it erroneously withhold recess as punishment (Thomas et al., 2024; London, 2019).

Underrepresented children attending schools in communities with lower socioeconomic status are even more at risk due to less access and greater restriction of recess as a disciplinary strategy (Tsai et al., 2024; Galaviz et al., 2021). The importance of unstructured playtime in primary schools should be recognized and promoted. It is not just a break from academic work but a crucial part of a child's physical and mental development (Bristow & Atkinson, 2020; Yogman et al., 2018).

### Conclusion

Play is a critical element for developing primary-grade children's social, cognitive, physical, language, and emotional development of youth. Play during these primary years makes a pivotal shift from being the way children think and behave into being something they do in addition to thinking and behaving. Vygotsky distinguished play as "the source of development... the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives" (Vygotsky, 2016, p. 18). For more than 100 years, research on the importance of child-initiated play has provided educators and parents with an abundance of research that unequivocally supports the necessity of formal and informal play for our primary youth. Despite this research demonstrating the benefits of extended playtime, the latest trends show a decline in both the quality and quantity of play- at home, in school, and other settings. This White Paper is a call to action and advocacy for those in roles that directly work with children and all who care about children.

## From Kindergarten to College: Embracing Playful Learning in Higher Education

*Andrea Sanchez*

### Introduction

Six years ago, I allowed play to help revitalize and reconceptualize my role as a public kindergarten teacher. During that time, I participated in a cohort of teachers in our county working to re-incorporate play into the early childhood classroom. That we even had to have a cohort to do this is a story for another time. I was at a point in my career where I needed to feel the delight in learning and teaching again, and this was my chance. I embraced this work, completely overhauling what I had done in the past and finding great joy in doing so. My role was to bring this work back to my school and support my colleagues while they worked to re-incorporate play into their classrooms. What I encountered, however, was great reluctance.

My colleagues were understandably apprehensive about incorporating play. It was not that they did not *believe* in the power of play. Instead, they were uncertain about creating a playful environment that met the state standards required by the administration. Throughout their training and careers, they had never been exposed to coursework or professional development emphasizing play's importance for young children.

### Conclusion

Implementing playful techniques allows educators to bridge this gap and model, creating a more engaging, student-centered learning environment. Playful learning strategies can positively impact student engagement and participation. While it does take more planning in the early stages, it is still possible to meet standards and, even more so, allow students to feel confident in demonstrating their understanding of the content.

## Play with Infants

*Dorothy Sluss*

### Introduction

Play is an essential part of the infant's life. After health and safety needs are met, the infant plays. They explore, play, and return to explore some more. The infant touches the adult's face, which makes a large oval with their mouth, and the infant tries to pull their hand away. This sort of game can be observed across cultures as infants and adults engage in games that increase bonding and attachment. These interactions contribute to the transmission of language and culture. Scholars have found that play contributes to developing social and cognitive skills, language, and emotional well-being (Neale et al., 2018). Unfortunately, Infant fingerplay games that were common for centuries have all but disappeared.

### Conclusion

Play during the first year of life is vital for the child. No other period in the child's life will see growth occur as rapidly as during this time. For this reason, adults need to know that play is as essential as food and sleep for the developing child. Play allows the child to make eye contact, talk, engage, and understand their world.

The infant arrives ready for interaction with the adult. When the adult finds ways to bring joy, laughter, and fun into the infant's world, they get it into their own. Sharing these special times with an infant creates a positive, trusting relationship that will reap benefits throughout the child's life.

# Decoding the Collegiate Mental Health Crisis: Embracing Playful Pedagogy and Valuing Playful Campuses

*Lauren Sundstrom*

## Introduction

College students across America are experiencing unprecedented levels of mental health challenges (Wang, 2020). This paper presents statistics defining the collegiate mental health crisis, touches on its probable causes, and recommends play-based solutions to improve mental health and student life more broadly.

## Conclusion

Formally Recognizing Play's Benefits on Campus and in the College Rankings  
Each year, entities including *U.S. News and World Report* and *The Princeton Review*, consider metrics like retention and graduation rates, class size, financial resources per student, and employability to rank America's colleges (Zuckerman, 2024). Rankings are increasingly controversial and arguably flawed, but most colleges and universities remain driven to improve their rankings (Diermeier, 2023), and many incoming students and employers rely on them. UCLA's *Daily Bruin* reports, "A higher ranking can result in an increased budget, and conversely, an increased budget can also lead to a higher ranking" (Gu, 2024). In recent years, rankings have expanded to consider student mental health, primarily measured by counselor-to-student ratios and availability (TPR, 2024). In the U.K., Humen.org surveyed students and investigated mental health staff training to create specific university mental health rankings (Humen, 2023). Other ranking systems attempt to measure student happiness or a school's "party" atmosphere (Niche, 2024).

The National Institute for Play (NIFP) maintains that colleges and universities have much to gain using the power of play. Schools incorporating play as a tool to improve mental health and capture additional benefits will thrive better and should be rewarded within college rankings. Factors such as playful pedagogy and intentionally playful campuses should be considered and explicitly valued, as these factors will raise

campus excellence and drive enrollment up. A play ranking could stand categorically alone or could support established metrics like student retention. It is worth reiterating that play does not reduce the rigor of a discipline or course or take away from what needs to be learned – in fact, it is quite the opposite (Forbes & Thomas, 2022). The science of play confirms it can ease mental health challenges and its vast corollary benefits. Finally, Figure 5 outlines the benefits of play, each applicable to improving college student life on all fronts. As these immense benefits become broadly recognized, leading higher education institutions seeking greater excellence can and will implement play.



## **Bringing Play Back to Middle School: Bringing Play Back to Middle School: How Board Games Boost Learning and Emotional Growth**

*Joseph Yaure*

### **Introduction**

As students reach middle school, they often see a decrease in time centered around play in favor of worksheets and quizzes. Recess and play have decreased since 2001, and over forty states do not require students to have recess. Middle school lesson plans focus more on presentations and exit tickets to assess student knowledge instead of unique play opportunities. One possible reason for this shift is that schools are expected to increase standardized test scores, and play is not seen as a way to prepare students for those tests. This common misconception can have drastic, negative impacts on students (Nix, 2022). Play is how younger students learn about the world around them. For older children, removing play reduces the focus on social-emotional learning (SEL), hindering empathy development (Bongiorno & Quinn, 2021). Instead of embedding SEL development into the students' classroom, it is often relegated to enrichment classes, such as art, or even less effective, into an entirely separate learning environment. All of this is to prepare emerging secondary students for high school, college, and the future job market. This common misconception hurts a child's creative development, which is needed for children to be successful both within the classroom and outside of the learning environment.

### **Conclusion**

Including board and role-playing games in middle school classrooms is an alternative to traditional worksheets. It is a needed strategy to foster creativity, engagement, and social-emotional learning. Board games like Diplomacy and Just One and role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons provide dynamic, interactive platforms for students to apply their knowledge, develop critical thinking skills, and enhance emotional intelligence. These games create a learning environment where students are motivated and empathetic. Embracing these strategies ensures that education remains relevant and deeply impactful. As educators, the commitment to

including play into the daily curriculum is an investment in the development of our students, preparing them not just for tests but for life.

## Play with College Students

*Bernadette Pilar Zermeño*

### Introduction

"This is so fun! I feel so alive and happy," thirty-five-year-old Samatha said as she finished the class. Samantha is a single mother, a preschool educator during the day, and a college student at night. Samantha graduated high school and took ECE courses at the local community college but could not finish them. After twenty years of fear of returning to school, she knew, "It was time to go back for myself and my child. I was nervous because I did not have a good experience in high school." Like many marginalized students and adults, returning to school can be intimidating, scary, and extremely difficult. As a professor supporting multi-aged students in college, we remember the important issues students face while also modeling how to ensure play happens throughout the day in their current or future classrooms. Unfortunately, we find that students returning to school bring memories of the traditional classroom that they experienced, many of which were not playful, enjoyable, or fun.

### Conclusion

Play is essential for both children and adults. The time is now to model, enjoy, and have fun with college students. More than ever, college professors must integrate play into college classrooms to ensure future educators can recognize the benefits of play and incorporate play into their future classrooms to help students cultivate essential skills such as creativity, resilience, collaboration, and stress management. Ultimately, by providing opportunities to play in college classrooms, professors will enhance student well-being and academic success and lead by example.

## The Healing Power of Play

Bruce Perry, M.D., PhD (Gaskill & Perry, 2014), early childhood professors, play therapists, and child life specialists have long acknowledged the healing power of play.

In this category of articles, authors investigate how play can heal the inner child of adults, the importance of developing resilience, and how play can be integrated into hospital settings to help children and their families build resilience, promote secure attachment, and provide therapeutic support.

The authors have provided you with research, strategies, and approaches for using play to heal the adverse experiences of children and adults and to support the development of resilience, a necessary element of childhood.

### Authors

#### **Play for Adults: Healing the Inner Child through Play**

Reagan Fulton

#### **Play and Resilience**

Stephanie Goloway, EdD

#### **Play in Hospitals**

Stephanie Kuntz and Myae Han

#### **The Critical Role of Intergenerational Play in Bridging Generations and Healing Trauma--- A Tribute to Dr. Edgar Klugman**

Delores Stegelin and Jennifer Kashuck

## **Play for Adults: Healing the Inner Child through Play**

*Reagan Fulton*

### **Introduction**

In today's fast-paced society, people often disregard the essence and value of play in adult life. Its vital role in enhancing health and mental well-being is frequently overlooked in contemporary society and scientific research. This white paper underscores the importance of play beyond childhood, advocating for its necessity as a catalyst for adult vitality and creativity.

### **Conclusion**

The shift towards integrating play is not merely about adding value to individual lives but about cultivating resilient, agile communities equipped to face the challenges of tomorrow. Through these collective efforts, play becomes a vibrant thread woven into the fabric of daily life, essential for renewal and growth in our personal and professional spheres. Thus, acknowledging and embracing the role of play is pivotal in sculpting a society that values well-being and happiness, ensuring that we never outgrow the joy of playing, even as adults.

## Play and Resilience

*Stephanie Goloway, EdD*

### Introduction

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study alerted us to childhood adversity's prevalence and lifelong impact (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014). Ongoing research, anecdotal evidence, and reports of the global pandemic's impact on both children and adults have confirmed that both short-term challenges with learning and behavior and long-term challenges with mental health, including depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders, have increased in children, youth, and the general population.

Neuroscience has attributed these increases in part to the effects of toxic stress and the trauma response on developing brains (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020). Those who work with children, teens, and adults across a wide variety of settings seek strategies to support those who struggle with trauma and toxic stress while meeting the needs of all. How do we help people bounce back after challenges and toxic stress?

Resilience is this capacity to overcome adversity. This white paper examines the neurodevelopmental construct of resilience and the importance of play to its development. It suggests using resilience as a framework for creating play-rich environments where all children and adults can thrive.

### Conclusion

When one has a deep understanding of play and the protective factors that support the development of resilience, it is not hard to make the connection between play and whatever standards "guide" our work with children. Both play and resilience have been critical aspects of the human experience long before standards were even a glimmer in policy-makers eyes. Both play and resilience will ride the waves of changing standards and be with us long after each succeeding set of parameters is literal and digital dust.

As play advocates, we are responsible for connecting the dots for those who need to see them. Most importantly, it is our responsibility to ensure that this powerful and primary way of supporting the neurodevelopmental capacity to adapt to change and challenge is preserved in the environments in which we work and play. By recognizing and valuing the specific conditions needed for the development of resilience, we can prevent resilience from becoming yet another buzzword that glimmers in and out of our awareness.

We all face challenges. We all need to overcome adversities, large and small, and move forward. With play in our toy boxes, the development and practice of resilience can affirm and enrich our humanity with a sparkle of "ordinary magic" and joy.

## Play in Hospitals

*Stephanie Kuntz and Myae Han*

### Introduction

Physical illness and hospitalization can significantly impact children's normal development and play experience (D'Antonio, 1984). Hospitalization can be considered an experience of anti-childhood, in which the child is isolated from their usual surroundings, faces non-normative challenges, and experiences regular discomfort, pain, stress, and anxiety (Haiat et al., 2003 ). Play can serve as a tool for reducing hospitalized children's anxiety levels, buffering stress, and aiding in their recovery process. Play provides positive benefits physically and psychologically. For children, play can also be utilized as a tool to promote parent-child attachment relationships, especially when children are separated from their familiar home environment.

### Conclusion

Play activities should be incorporated in healthcare settings. Medical-themed pretend play can help the child understand their environment. Art can serve as an avenue for communicating complex emotions children are not ready to verbalize. Collaborative games help develop cooperative relationships. These experiences help reduce stress and promote physical, social, and cognitive development (D'Antonio, 1984). Medical professionals are positioned to support the family functioning of their patients facing adverse circumstances, which benefits patient outcomes (Lutz et al., 2009).



## The Critical Role of Intergenerational Play in Bridging Generations and Healing Trauma--- A Tribute to Dr. Edgar Klugman

*Delores Stegelin and Jennifer Kashuck*

### Introduction

*Intergenerational Play* is an important issue. In the USA, we traditionally form groups by age levels that tend to stratify the population and separate the generations. We see this practice in schools, faith-based and community-based activities for children, youth, adults, and the elderly. Dr. Edgar Klugman, a well-known family systems and play researcher, advocated for greater interactions between the generations, particularly older people, and younger children (Klugman, Stegelin, & Kashuck, 2023). *This paper presents the case for implementing more intergenerational play-based activities in our communities that strengthen and enhance the quality of relationships between the oldest and the youngest members of our society.*

### Conclusion

The research on intergenerational relationships and the benefits of mutually caring and sharing activities across the elderly and the younger populations strongly supports increased community-based activities that unite the generations. Many grandparents live hundreds of miles from their children and grandchildren, leaving a void in many families of the presence of the elderly. Through research, community practices, and policy-making, we can strengthen and enhance the quantity and quality of intergenerational relationships that benefit all.

## Readiness is Not What You Think

This category of articles dispels the myth that getting children ready for a future grade or age by pushing academics down to younger and younger children is effective. This push-down approach is harming, not accelerating, development. The focus on getting children ready interferes with children developing the foundational approaches needed to make sense of the world that leads to future academic success. Like building a house, ignoring the requirements for building a solid foundation impacts the integrity and structure of the house. Ignoring the approaches to learning impacts the developmental milestones achieved through child-initiated play. Pushing down academics before children are developmentally ready makes learning harder, tedious, and frustrating. These demotivating factors create feelings of inadequacy and impact children's interests in learning.

### Authors

#### **A Day in The Life at Barron Park Playschool**

by Kim Adams

#### **Executive Function is the Key to Success: A Bird's Eye Visualization**

by Sally Bailey

#### **Academic Pushdown**

Heather Bernt-Santy

#### **Choice During the Day**

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**Executive Function is Key to Success**

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**Executive Function: An Early Key to Successful Outcomes**

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**Understanding the Crucial Role of Early Childhood in Developing Positive Dispositions Through Play**

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**Transitions to and through school**

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**The Significance of Choice: Empowering Students for Lifelong Learning**

Sharon M. Peck

**The Negative Impacts of Standardized Testing:  
Why Authentic Assessment and Play Offer Solutions**

Brian A. Stone

## **Play in the Primary School**

Whitney W. Woodward, M.Ed

## A Day in The Life at Barron Park Playschool

*by Kim Adams*

### Introduction

On a cool spring morning in the Barron Park neighborhood of Palo Alto, California, 4-year-old Tom pedals quickly on her two-wheeler bike to keep up with her dad and older sister. Tom's backpack is filled with her lunch, her favorite water bottle (the one with the yellow lid), and at least one change of clothes. Tom is on her way to Barron Park Playschool. A space created and curated for children 2-5 years old to play, explore, and connect (with people and ideas). This is the story of Tom and a day in her life at Barron Park Playschool.

### Conclusion

Tom settles back down into the reading nook and ends her day where it began, engrossed in the imaginary space of stories. Tom's mom arrives, pushes her new baby brother in a stroller, and joins Tom under the tree. Together, they read more stories until her mom tells Tom it is time to head home. Tom hugs me and her other teachers goodbye and gathers her backpack, water bottle, and glue gun creation. She walks out the gate, and I hear her explaining to her mom how she can reflect light with her "reflector." The outdoor classrooms and teachers she leaves today will be here to welcome her back tomorrow for more creative, sensory-rich, independent, and cooperative play!

## Executive Function is the Key to Success: A Bird's Eye Visualization

*by Sally Bailey*

### Introduction

Executive function (EF) is a frequently used term that appears in articles about development from childhood through old age. Each time I read about EF, the construct is either presented as a monolith, described in a vague manner, or as a mixture of smaller components (but never the same ones) (Gioia et al., 2002; Goldberg, 2009; Najdowski et al., 2014; Siegel, 2020). This may be because EF is an umbrella term covering a wide array of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills that assist in structuring and organizing our lives -- like an executive assistant would. Except, because we do not have a little assistant in our heads, we need to learn how to do the work ourselves. All EFs originate in the same place: the brain's prefrontal cortex. In addition to organizing us, they help us make choices, solve problems, and facilitate the regulation of our emotions and behavior.

### Conclusion

Being able to look at a bird's eye view of EFs provides a model of where to start when guiding someone as they grow more complex skills. Learning how to regulate one's own emotions and behaviors takes time. Making good decisions based on thought and emotion, give and take, and considering actions and their consequences need to be practiced. If resolving group conflicts were easy, we would never get involved in wars. It is easy to forget how long it took each of us to master our EFs. We cannot expect children to develop theirs any faster. However, using drama games and other play activities can scaffold their skills in an intentional and proactive manner.

## Academic Pushdown

*Heather Bernt-Santy*

### Introduction

Young children in early childhood settings in the United States are experiencing increasing pressure to demonstrate academic achievement at increasingly early ages. This phenomenon is often referred to as the **academic pushdown**. State early learning standards and professional preparation guidelines create programs where children under five are subjected to academic expectations that would be more appropriate for older children. The negative impacts on children demand our attention.

### Conclusion

While adults may be able to guess what might be joyful, meaningful, and actively engaging for a child, the surest way to provide experiences like those described by the authors is to create spaces for a child's agentic behavior. In settings informed by the academic pushdown, legitimate opportunities for the provision of these five characteristics are rare.

## Choice During the Day

*Peter Dargatz*

### Introduction

Everyone loves options. Not everyone wants to be told what to do in every situation. People who are different should be allowed to express those differences in a manner that best suits them rather than try to fit into a "one size fits all" world.

In today's classroom, as expectations continue to rise and the pressure to perform is growing, we can offset this pressure by focusing on student choice. While we might not be able to instantly overhaul the educational system into one that is more developmentally effective, recognizing the power of student choice and putting that power into action is a reasonable first step.

### Conclusion

Understanding the power of choice will motivate schools and educators to implement choice. By starting small, educators can work to find a healthier balance between what is best for kids and continuing to complete their seemingly ever-growing list of teaching responsibilities. Strategies for implementing choice can be used across all grade levels. Simple strategies like flexible seating, prioritizing choice time in the schedules, and providing options are a great start. With time, effort, and a focused approach to finding ways to empower students, choice can become exactly what it was meant to be. Choice can be how and why students learn.



## The Danger of Push Down Curriculum

*Peter Dargatz*

### Introduction

Out in the real world, not paying attention to timing, experience, and readiness can have some negative consequences. In the classroom, these consequences can be downright dire. While the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 ravaged many aspects of our everyday lives, it dramatically impacted the education system. But let's not blame the pandemic for all the problems in today's education system. Issues with the way we instruct our future generations preceded any pandemic. The increased emphasis on higher academic standards in Early Childhood Education has changed the instructional landscape and developed myths of quality learning. In recent decades, pre- and primary schools have begun to focus more on assessments and testing as a determinant of quality learning; this emphasis has led to a shift to "push down academics," which refers to an increase of academic standards at a younger age (Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, 2016). Test scores and data points have become increasingly important contributors to society's perceived notion that we must do more and more academically sooner and sooner. The evolution of education emphasizes student performance based on the results of mandated, standardized assessments rather than overall comprehension of an already rigorous curriculum. These scores help drive classroom, grade, school, and district decision-making. Schools aim to have the highest scores on these assessments and associated school report cards to seek support and favor from their community and state, essentially using these successes to obtain funding. Funding can be lessened and withheld if schools aren't successful or at least showing significant progress towards success.

### Conclusion

So, how do we reverse the trend and build strong, independent learners with a thirst for growth and an excitement to excel? No matter what we do, we must remember that readiness, experience, and timing must be at the core of our decision-making. Teaching children where they are is much more important than getting them where they need to

be. Let's avoid wrapping children around a set curriculum and instead use it to fit learners at their pace, interest level, and ability. Let's slow down to catch up.

## Kindergarten and Play

*Peter Dargatz*

### Introduction

Kindergarten is definitely not what it used to be. When German educator Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) started the first kindergarten, Garden of Children, in 1840, he emphasized, "Children are like tiny flowers; they are varied and need care, but each is beautiful alone and glorious when seen in the community of peers." I think he would be more than disappointed in a great deal of what he would see in kindergarten classrooms today. The power of play seems to have been replaced by the pressure of performance. Academic achievement trumps the social and emotional development nurtured through play and needed for successful adjustment to the classroom community.

### Conclusion

So what can we do? By we, I mean parents, teachers, administrators, community stakeholders, and most important of all, students. Individually, we can think outside the box, but collectively, we can obliterate it. It's time to speak up about what needs to change. It's time to question things that aren't productive or positive for students and families. It's time to stand up against what is unnecessary and overappreciated. It's time to put students ahead of statistics. It's time to take that outrage and turn it into opportunity.

## Executive Function: An Early Key to Successful Outcomes

Sharon Rodgers Jackson

### Introduction

Executive Functioning (EF) skills are essential skills that help children navigate their daily lives. EF skills help children control their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and process complex ideas. To be successful long-term, children need EF skills to control themselves and perform tasks well. There are multiple ways people describe these skills, but most emphasize five subskills (e.g., Eberhart et al., 2023; Obradovic et al., 2018): *inhibitory control*, *working memory*, *cognitive flexibility*, *organizational skills*, and *emotional control*.

### Conclusion

Adults have a responsibility to provide the materials and create the time and space for children to engage in socio-dramatic and social fantasy play; thus, children have an opportunity to develop EF skills safely and effectively. This should include both the materials for children to engage in play representing the spaces they are familiar with for their socio-dramatic play, and open-ended materials such as blocks to enhance their self-active play. Schools need to provide time during the day for play, and parents need to prioritize unscheduled time in which children can play at home. In addition, the adults must understand how to participate in the play as a co-player, letting the children lead the action. Receiving play training in order to be able to recognize and respond to different types of play while still letting the play be child-guided is a good way to better understand the role of adults in play.

## Play and Self-Regulation

*Ingrid Kanics*

### Introduction

Self-regulation is closely linked to brain development, particularly in the areas responsible for processing sensory information:

- **Brainstem:** regulates basic functions like breathing, heart rate, and arousal levels
- **Cerebellum:** coordinates movement, balance, and sensory integration
- **Prefrontal cortex:** manages executive functions, decision-making, and self-regulation

Since many of these areas of the brain undergo massive development during early childhood, play can significantly impact the integration of sensory inputs that support this development process.

### Conclusion

By exploring and expressing emotions through play, children better understand their internal physical and emotional landscape and improve their ability to regulate their emotions as they play. This helps them broaden their understanding of what the world feels like for others, allowing them to put themselves in another's shoes with empathy and understanding. It builds social communication skills that allow them to verbalize this knowledge with others while playing.

## Designing an Effective Curriculum

*Deb Lawrence, PhD*

### Introduction

Designing an effective curriculum raises the question of what exactly a curriculum is. The answer to this question is more straightforward than you think. Bev Bos reminded us that the children are the curriculum (Bos, Holmes, Video: Starting at Square One, 1994). Over the last few decades, early childhood programs have moved away from a child-led curriculum, focusing instead on getting children "ready" for a future classroom or school. The emphasis on "readiness" has created a curriculum that arrives in a binder or a box unrelated to the children's environment, culture, or prior knowledge. Revisiting the value of a child-driven curriculum and offering approaches to developing a child-driven curriculum will be the focus of this paper.

### Conclusion

The children in your classroom are the most essential factor in selecting the curriculum. The curriculum must be based on what is meaningful and relevant to children's daily or weekly experiences and deepen children's learning about their community. Using inquiry, emergent, or integrated approaches to curriculum intentionally moves away from a weekly or monthly theme-based approach, often centered around seasons or celebrations of traditional holidays that are not culturally responsive. It eliminates an annual theme cycle that is repeated year after year with similar activities and learning objectives. Including integrated, inquiry, and emergent curriculum elements allows for deeper investigations to answer questions that arise and build on children's prior knowledge, continuing to expand their curiosity and love of learning.

## Understanding the Crucial Role of Early Childhood in Developing Positive Dispositions Through Play

*Deb Lawrence, PhD*

### Introduction

Parents, schools, and society pressure early childhood programs to prepare children for the academic rigors they will face in kindergarten and the primary grades. This situation has influenced many early childhood programs to move from child-initiated play-based programs to a more structured teacher-directed approach (Pennsylvania Department of Human Services & Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). Unfortunately, this emphasis on a teacher-directed approach does not align with developmental milestones or pay attention to the research and theories on how children develop. Instead, it creates classrooms with unrealistic academic expectations and children who find learning too complex and tedious. As a result, teacher-directed classrooms have teachers seeing more behavior problems, resulting in physicians seeing more children who have anxiety or depression (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2007). These results contribute to the United States' test scores being lower than in other countries (Los Angeles Times, 2017). Clearly, something is not working. However, we can start to make a change by recognizing the importance of the teacher's and child's roles in the learning process and creating opportunities for children to acquire positive dispositions or approaches to learning.

### Conclusion

Intentional teachers support children's development by providing a consistent but flexible daily routine, an enriched environment with exciting materials, building positive relationships, and using teaching strategies that see play as the primary way to foster positive dispositions or approaches to learning. This focus moves away from a "readiness" mindset by providing time and space for children to grow and flourish in an exciting, joyful, responsive classroom that promotes curiosity, exploration, and discovery.

## Transitions to and through School

*Kim Moroney*

### Introduction

Has the concept of “readiness,” as in “school readiness,” evolved to the point where the term is no longer connected to starting school? Has the re-conceptualisation finally moved away from expecting a child to be “ready” for something that is usually unknown or at least unfamiliar, to a now more nuanced understanding of transitioning to school and eventually transitioning through school? If so, is this re-conceptualisation understood by all stakeholders in prior to school and school settings and is it communicated within society, especially to families?

### Conclusion

Shifting away from outdated notions of readiness to moving towards a readiness equation and ultimately moving to a nuanced understanding of transitions involves recognising the comprehensive and individualised nature of transitions, promoting supportive environments, and valuing the whole, agentic child in the context of their unique transitions journey.

Successful transitions to school lay solid foundations for positive partnerships and relationships with families that are important not just for the transition process but also for families’ ongoing engagement with the school and in their child’s learning, development, and well-being. High expectations for all children and families, coupled with recognition of the strengths and knowledge they bring, are cornerstones of effective transition-to-school approaches, regardless of the backgrounds of those involved (Dockett & Perry, 2021, 2014).



## Executive Function is Key to Success

*Myae Han & Rosa Mykyta-Chomsky*

### Introduction

Executive Functioning (EF) skills are essential skills that help children navigate their daily lives. EF skills help children control their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and process complex ideas. To be successful in the long term, children need EF skills to control themselves and perform tasks well. People describe these skills in multiple ways, but most emphasize five subskills (e.g., Eberhart et al., 2023; Obradovic et al., 2018): *inhibitory control, working memory, cognitive flexibility, organizational skills, and emotional control*.

### Conclusion

Providing children the opportunity to explore these materials and play freely requires them to utilize self-regulatory skills, promoting the development of EF. Parents and teachers are responsible in their respective settings to promote child-directed, socio-dramatic, and social fantasy play. They are responsible for providing the tools necessary, the time for children to explore and play, and the playmates, including themselves as co-players. For teachers and parents, learning to participate in play without directing it requires additional training, be that in-service training for early childhood educators or lessons and readings on how to engage in play as a co-player as opposed to a leader for parents. To promote children's EF development through play, adults must defer to the child as the expert while providing materials, space, and time for the play to exist.

## **The Significance of Choice: Empowering Students for Lifelong Learning**

*Sharon M. Peck, PhD*

### **Introduction**

The concept of choice has emerged as a potent tool for enhancing student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of providing students with opportunities for autonomy and self-directed learning. Particularly within playful learning classrooms, where the focus is on fostering curiosity, creativity, and exploration, offering students the power of choice becomes indispensable.

### **Conclusion**

Choice is a key component of play for all ages. Incorporating choice in play-based learning has far-reaching implications for student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement. By embracing choice as a pedagogical principle, educators can create dynamic and inclusive learning environments where students thrive as active learners and contributors. As we continue to navigate the complexities of contemporary education, prioritizing choice empowers students to become lifelong learners equipped with the skills and agency to succeed in an ever-changing world.

## **The Negative Impacts of Standardized Testing: Why Authentic Assessment and Play Offer Solutions**

*Brian A. Stone*

### **Introduction**

Over the past century, standardized testing has become a pervasive, dominating force in the global educational context. In the American system, standardized tests have profoundly influenced children and adolescents, and they have greatly impacted how our youth become educated (Heissel et al., 2021; Lai, 2022). The insidious structures, purposes, and practices of testing have deep roots that have penetrated every aspect of the teaching, learning, and assessment process in schools (Cunningham, 2018). Because educators are so entrenched in these practices, generations of children have been negatively impacted with little relief in sight.

### **Conclusion**

Standardized testing is ubiquitous and deeply ingrained in the culture of education today. However, this particular assessment practice, which was designed to measure knowledge and skills on a massive scale, is wholly inappropriate for modern schools. Standardized tests are not particularly accurate and come with a whole host of problematic issues that can be detrimental to children, teachers, and schools. The proponents of standardized testing have less and less ground on which to stand, and the opponents are becoming louder and more confident. The research is becoming clearer, and when the dust settles, there is really only one path to take. Ditch standardized tests and embrace authentic assessment tools, including play-based assessments.

## **Play in the Primary School**

*Whitney W. Woodward, M.Ed.*

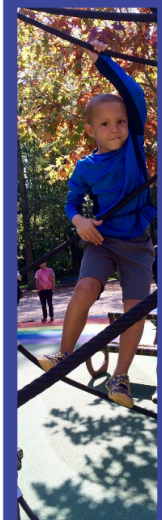
### **Introduction**

Traditional schooling and play have often been at odds with each other within the mindset of many educators, policymakers, and parents. Play is not just a leisure activity, but it is critical to the success and well-being of children in primary school. Children are born with the biological drive to play. This is as necessary as breathing, sleeping, and eating (Brown, 2009). When this drive is suppressed in a school setting, students are deprived of a biological need and suffer from a lack of holistic development (Graham & Burghardt (2010). To truly meet the needs of children in primary school, they must have ample play opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

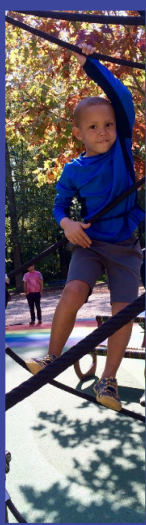
Creating space for play in primary schools is not only feasible but mandatory. Children need teacher and administrator advocates within the schools, as well as parent and stakeholder advocates supporting schools. There is no shortage of information and research supporting the fact that play is developmentally critical for primary-age children at school. It is up to all of us to protect play in primary schools for the sake of our children.

# Essays



## Readiness Is Not What You Think

- [Executive Function is the Key to Success](#)
- [Play in the Primary School](#) -
- [The Significance of Choice: Empowering Students for Lifelong Learning](#)
- [Transitions To and Through School](#)
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## Executive Function is the Key to Success: A Bird's Eye Visualization

by Sally Bailey

### **Problem Statement: What Are Executive Functions, and Why Are They Important?**

Executive function (EF) is a frequently used term that appears in articles about development from childhood through old age. Each time I read about EF, the construct is either presented as a monolith, described in a vague manner, or as a mixture of smaller components (but never the same ones) (Gioia et al., 2002; Goldberg, 2009; Najdowski et al., 2014; Siegel, 2020). This may be because EF is an umbrella term covering a wide array of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills that assist in structuring and organizing our lives -- like an executive assistant would. Except, because we do not have a little assistant in our heads, we need to learn how to do the work ourselves. All EFs originate in the same place: the brain's prefrontal cortex. In addition to organizing us, they help us make choices, solve problems, and facilitate the regulation of our emotions and behavior.

Parents, teachers, and therapists need a way to clearly visualize EF skills so they can be understood, developed, and harnessed. In fact, if one looks closely, simple, basic EFs enable the more complex ones. For instance, attention appears to be the keystone EF. It is necessary for any of the others to work.

As EFs become more complicated, they require input from more than one type of brain process. The most complex ones require cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills simultaneously. With a model to work from and an understanding of each skill, a parent, teacher, or therapist can choose games and activities that match children's and clients' developmental levels and build their EFs as they play. In addition, knowing which EFs need to be mastered helps the caregiver scaffold EF development.

### **Background: Visualizing and Working with the Concept of Executive Functions**

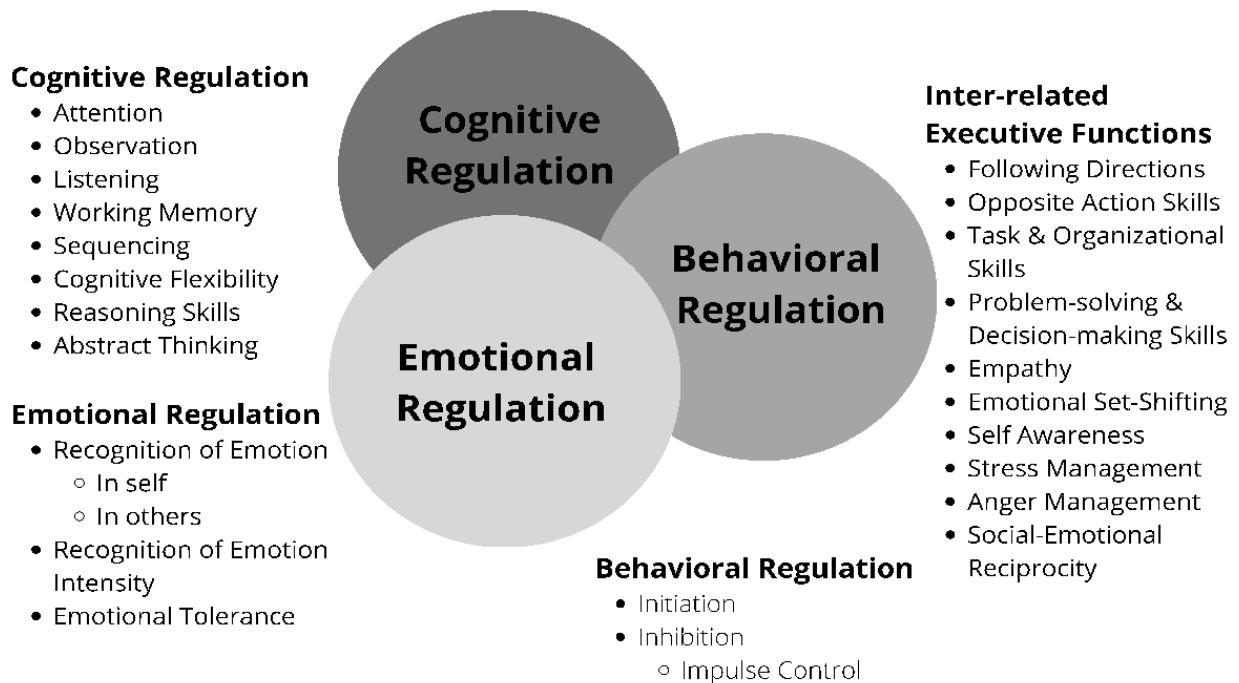
I am a registered drama therapist, and I use drama games and other play activities as warm-ups and lead-in activities to prepare clients of all ages for more in-depth psychotherapy. Sometimes, in the beginning, my clients have trouble paying attention and working together, so I need to focus on developing their EFs before

getting into deeper work. Skills to support each other and follow directions are basic building blocks for good group processes. This is as necessary for adults as it is for child clients.

Several years ago, my drama therapy colleague Paige Dickinson and I were writing our book *The Drama Therapy Decision Tree* (2021). We found that to talk clearly about how EFs worked and how they are interrelated, we needed a visual to refer to. When we could not find one, we created one. Figure 1 is our bird' s-eye view of how we organized “the whole Magilla.”

As can be seen from Figure 1, we started by grouping all the EFs that involve only one processing system: only cognition (attention, observation skills, listening skills, working memory, sequencing, cognitive flexibility, reasoning skills, and abstract thinking), only emotion, (recognition of emotions in self and others, recognition of emotional intensity, and emotional tolerance), and only behavior (initiation, inhibition, and impulse control). However, notice that the circles representing each processing system partly overlap in the chart. More about this later. SEE CHART ON NEXT PAGE

## EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS



**Figure 1: A Bird’s Eye View of How Executive Functions Can be Organized.**



As an example of how basic EF skills support more complex ones, here are a few examples of how cognitive EFs relate to each other. It is necessary to develop attention before one can observe or listen. Within attention, there are two main subsets of skills: attention focus and attention-switching. These must be developed before one can observe, listen, or be cognitively flexible. After learning to collect and remember information through observation and listening, the information can be put into sequence or used in working memory. Working memory happens when items in consciousness are compared and contrasted: in short, thought about. Only about four items (plus or minus two) can stay in working memory at one time (Stein, 2006). Attention-switching is essential for cognitive flexibility as that skill requires letting go of one idea to consider and possibly choose another.

Reasoning skills require all the basic cognitive EFs. Abstract thinking usually does not develop until children's brains are about 11 years old, when they enter Piaget's Formal Operations stage of learning. Once they can reason abstractly, they can imagine and manipulate concepts in their heads instead of requiring all concepts to be concrete and physically represented.

# INTER-RELATED EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS

## **Cognitive Regulation & Emotional Regulation**

### **Regulation**

- Empathy
- Emotional Attention Set-Shifting
- Self Awareness
- Recognizing Triggers

## **Cognitive, Emotional, & Behavioral Regulation**

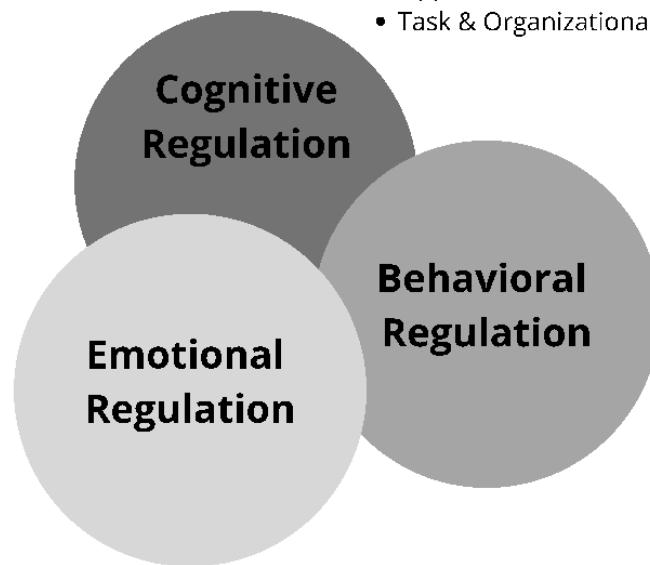
### **Regulation**

- Stress Management/ Coping Skills
- Anger Management
- Problem-solving & Decision-making Skills
- Social-Emotional Reciprocity

## **Cognitive & Behavioral Regulation**

### **Regulation**

- Following Directions
- Opposite Action Skills
- Task & Organizational Skills



**Figure 2:** EFs that exist within the overlap of Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral Regulation.

As illustrated in Figure 2, Paige Dickinson and I then grouped the EFs that combine cognition and emotion (empathy, emotional-attention set-shifting, self-awareness, and recognizing triggers), cognition and behavior (following directions, opposite action skills, organization skills, and task skills), and cognition, emotion, and behavior (coping skills, stress management, anger management, problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, and social-emotional reciprocity). While doing this, we had a “light bulb moment”: we noticed that cognition was involved in all the combined EFs. There did not seem to be any that combined emotion and behavior regulation alone. Is this why the cognitive EFs are crucial for all the others to work? We don’t know for sure, but it’s an interesting thought.

The cognitive EFs of attention, sequencing, and working memory must be developed before one can follow directions (a combined cognitive and behavioral EF). Attention, working memory, cognitive flexibility, and abstract thinking must be developed before one can enact opposite action skills (another combined cognitive and behavioral EF). This means that when a child cannot follow directions or play a game involving opposite action skills, they may not have mastered a few needed basic EFs yet. Once they can use them, they will be ready to play more complex games. Therefore, parents, teachers, and therapists need to identify which basic skills still need to be developed by observing as their children/clients interact and play.

### **Appropriate Approaches/Strategies**

I became strongly aware of using games and activities to train people in EFs when I worked with Kevin Spencer, a magician who teaches people with cognitive and physical disabilities how to do magic tricks. He does this a) because it is fun and, therefore, reinforcing to do and b) to improve deficits in certain basic EFs as well as motor skills. These EFs increase as his clients become engaged in practicing their favorite tricks. Kevin's research has demonstrated that learning magic tricks expands basic EFs and begins developing more complex ones (Yuen et al., 2023). Ultimately, his clients' self-efficacy and self-confidence grow, and their locus of control becomes more internal. When they start to believe they have control over their own motivation, behavior, body, and social environment, they develop more autonomy and the ability to believe they can succeed.

Working with Kevin, I realized that all the drama games I use are scaffolding my students' and clients' executive functions! This allows them to work through many problems that have been holding them back. The key is identifying which EFs they struggle with while playing a specific game.

For instance, children with ADHD have difficulty paying attention because they are always being distracted by everything else going on in the room. They get lost in a game like "Bunny, Bunny" or "Chick-a-berry," which both have many different movements going on simultaneously. Even if they are told what to look at or what to look for, they have difficulty focusing on the appropriate action. What they need is

practice paying attention and knowing when to switch focus to a different part of the game. What games would teach that? Well, games that focus on attention and attention-switching and use only one change at a time and/or have one main rule like “Zip, Zap, Zop,” “Follow the Leader,” or “Dude!” Partner games like “Mirroring” or “Change Three” are even more basic because instead of a whole group, there is only one other person to focus on. As the ability to focus their attention improves, they can move on to more complex games like “Decisions, Decisions!” In this game, the group is given two choices, such as, “Which would you pick? A kangaroo or a rabbit?” “Pizza or spaghetti?” Each person goes to the right side of the room or the left side, according to their choice. Choosing between two alternatives provides practice in switching attention.

What other EFs are those games in the above paragraph helping to develop at the same time? “Zip, zap, zop” helps with sequencing. “Follow the Leader” and “Mirroring” both help with body movement control, observation skills, and basic one-on-one teamwork. “Dude!” also works on observation skills plus nonverbal communication. “Change Three” works on observation skills and working memory. In addition to observation skills, “Decisions, Decisions!” requires the beginning of basic cognitive flexibility and decision-making, which build on the ability to switch attention from one thing to another.

If drama games are too difficult, adapt them by changing the aspects of the game that the group is struggling with, then slowly build back to levels of more difficulty. For instance, if students struggle with working memory and/or sequencing, play an add-on memory game like “I’m going on a camping trip, and I’m going to take...” In this type of game, one person starts, and each subsequent person in the circle adds an item they would take with them. Each player begins with the first item mentioned and adds the next ones in order until all have been said. Then, they add their new item. To simplify the game, first teach it to each player by saying only their item in the circle go-around. As they do this, write down each item and, at the end, read the list back to the group. See if they have anything to add to the list. An additional support would be to have each person act out their item as they say it (Shaefer, 2018).

The next time you play the game, make it a little more difficult. Each person says what they would bring, BUT after the new player says, “I’m going to...” start back at the

first player and have each player in order say and act out their own item until you get to the current player. Then, move on to the next one in the circle...and go back to the beginning to repeat all the items in order. The game may have to be played this way several times, along with other games that strengthen sequencing and working memory. When you feel the group is ready to move up a level, experiment with the whole group working together to remember the list from the first item to the player who has not yet added theirs. Use the group's memory to support all the players and exercise their working memories. When you think they can hold an entire sequence in working memory, try having just the adding-on player list all the items from the beginning by themselves OR list from their item in a backward direction to the first. I also recommend changing the place you go to each time you play the game to give the players variety. Let them think about what they are bringing to a farm, a campout, their grandmother's house, or a picnic. This improves their problem-solving and decision-making skills and helps generalize them to other situations.

The most difficult EFs to learn are those that deal with social reciprocity: boundaries, conflict resolution, group decision-making and problem-solving, teamwork, trust, and verbal and nonverbal expressiveness and communication skills. Without words and appropriate physical expressions, any attempts at working through conflict resolution or group work may hit snags and end in emotional and behavioral dysregulation. When competitive games are played, there tends to be conflict. This is why I stick with cooperative games when I am working with a new group or when I have a group that I know needs to build basic EFs.

Our American culture is very competitive. Sports – the more combative, the better – bring competition into our homes on our TVs daily. Baseball used to be the national pastime in a less competitive era, but now football, soccer, wrestling, boxing, cage fury fighting, and roller derby, all more competitive and often violent, are popular. We watch cut-throat game shows, like *Survivor*, where players are encouraged to lie, cheat, steal, and then vote each other off the island. The business world is tremendously competitive, as is politics. Competition is typically considered the highest form of group play, supposedly preparing us for “real life.”

In real life, however, competition is difficult to handle. Competition can also damage competitors physically and psychologically. Cooperative games are difficult, too, but they focus on people working to create something together and are better for generating a positive group process. EFs can only be practiced and built in a supportive, safe environment. If a group member always feels vulnerable and worries about being attacked or humiliated, they will not want to take a risk. Instead, they will stick with their current skills to protect themselves. Learning and exploring stop. Play then becomes a gauntlet, not a holding environment for building the skills needed to succeed in life and make our communities more pleasant places to live in.

### **Conclusion/ Recommendations**

Being able to look at a bird's eye view of EFs provides a model of where to start when guiding someone as they grow more complex skills. Learning how to regulate one's own emotions and behaviors takes time. Making good decisions based on thought and emotion, give and take, and considering actions and their consequences need to be practiced. If resolving group conflicts were easy, we would never get involved in wars.

It is easy to forget how long it took each of us to master our EFs. We cannot expect children to develop theirs any faster. However, using drama games and other play activities can scaffold their skills in an intentional and proactive manner.

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## Play in the Primary School

Whitney W. Woodward, M.Ed.

### Introduction

Traditional schooling and play have often been at odds with each other within the mindset of many educators, policymakers, and parents. Play is not just a leisure activity, but it is critical to the success and well-being of children in primary school. Children are born with the biological drive to play. This is as necessary as breathing, sleeping, and eating (Brown, 2009). When this drive is suppressed in a school setting, students are deprived of a biological need and suffer from a lack of holistic development (Graham & Burghardt (2010). To truly meet the needs of children in primary school, they must have ample play opportunities.

### The Benefits of Play

In addition to meeting children's basic needs, play has numerous benefits in the primary school setting. Play allows children to grow and thrive cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically (International Play Association, 2014b). As Miguel Sicart eloquently explained, "Play is the force that pulls us together. It is a way of explaining the world, others, and ourselves. Play is expressing ourselves- who we want or do not want to be. Play is what we do when we are human." (Sicart, 2017, p. 1). We cannot educate children without play. We often say it is developmentally *appropriate* to play, but it is developmentally *critical* to play. Play allows children to seek out challenge and joy and work through positive adversity in a space where they have choice and agency. In play, they can have the time, space, and freedom to explore and evolve (Yogman et al., 2018). We should all strive to preserve the joy and fulfillment that play brings to children in our primary education systems.

However, play is often a challenge for primary schools due to teachers' increasing demands to produce measurable academic instruction in the classroom with specific learning objectives and outcomes, often written out on a timetable. "Accountability measures, standardized testing, and pressure to meet the demands of the curriculum have driven teachers to forsake best practice methods and developmentally appropriate



learning” (Bestwick, 2021, p. 51). With increasing pressure for schools to make academic gains, especially as we realize the types of academic gaps many students are working through due to the pandemic, teachers are under more pressure than ever to have robust academic output. However, this does not need to be at the expense of play. Instead, play is the critical piece for the primary grades to ensure students have access to all the tools they need for success in the classroom, and it can coexist harmoniously with academic instruction, not hinder it. It is not a trade-off but a win-win situation for both play and academics in primary school education.

As most children enter the primary grades at age five, we know that “Learning is at its best for fives when it is both structured and exploratory: structured through a clear, predictable schedule, exploratory through carefully constructed areas where they can initiate their own active discoveries through play- the vital work of the five-year-old.” (Wood, 2017, p. 44). We know that children enter primary school needing to play while also being cognizant that this need for play does not end or taper throughout later school years or even into adulthood.

### **The Case for Primary Grade Play**

When kindergarten was founded in 1836, Friedrich Froebel understood that play was and is a critical component in educating children. Froebel believed that play is the principle means of learning in early childhood. In play, children construct their understanding of the world through direct experience (The Froebel Trust). When children enter a kindergarten classroom, their first instinct is not to sit quietly to attend to an assigned task but to explore, ask questions, make connections, and play.

When children play in a primary classroom, they *learn to communicate*. Children negotiate roles through play in the classroom, create shared story narratives, and act out stories. Children who play understand each other through language as a shared instrument (Heideman & Hewett, 2010). To witness a play-filled primary classroom is to hear students actively engaged with one another, asking open-ended questions,

negotiating, reframing their thinking, and actively listening. The beautiful part of play is that there is no determined outcome. Children navigate and construct the play scenario and interactions as the play develops. They are incorporating problem-solving, self-control, conflict resolution, and creativity. This emphasis on communication and collaboration through play is crucial for the development of these skills in our primary school students.

When children play in a primary classroom, they *learn to take risks*. With play, students are allowed a safe space for failures and risk-taking, allowing them to be vulnerable and build perseverance and resilience.

For the child, play is also a testing or try-out process in other ways. The child gains his understanding of values and norms by trial and error and increases his understanding of problems and conflicts that may be difficult to understand...Play allows a child to test missing insights and understanding in a nonbinding, low-risk context. (Lillemayer, 2009, p. 48)

Taking risks gives children a golden opportunity for the greatest gift in education: Discovery.

When children play in a primary classroom, they *create more engagement and have a deeper interest than with traditional lessons* (Stone et al., 2020). With free play, students can move, collaborate in groups, and self-select areas they are interested in. Without play, children cannot choose what they learn in the classroom. Without play, the teacher takes the student's investment and agency over their learning. If we are to give students the gift of metacognition, they must be able to learn what interests them, and play allows them to discover their passions.

When children play in a primary classroom, they *self-regulate*. As any teacher in a primary school setting will tell you, behavior management is one of the most challenging parts of teaching children at this age. Using play as a tool in morning meetings addresses the "human need to feel a sense of significance and belonging and to have fun" (Kriete & Davis, 2020, p. 18). Children need to express themselves and, yes, have

fun in a place where they are open to learning. Going back to the idea of play as a biological need, we can see that in the same way that we cannot teach a hungry child, we cannot teach a child who is deprived of play. They are not able to learn unless their basic needs are met. This role of play in fostering self-regulation is crucial in managing behavior in our primary education settings.

Children who play in a primary classroom *learn to read and write*. Play in literacy allows children to have ownership and agency over their learning. In activities such as a storyteller's workshop, children can use their voices through play to create stories with characters, settings, plots, conflicts, and resolutions. All these writing mechanics unfold through play. Vivian Paley discovered that allowing students the time to use imaginative play in the classroom was critical to building their voices as storytellers, which in turn helped increase their vocabulary and create effective writers. Additionally, through play, children's understanding of literacy develops through using symbolic meaning as a foundation for understanding oral and written language. (Wohlwend, 2011).

Children who play in a primary classroom learn to solve creatively. Play plants the seeds for innovation. "The ability to play is critical not only to being happy, but also to sustaining social relationships and being a creative, innovative person." (Brown, 2017, p.6). Part of the beauty of play is that there is no specified outcome, and children who play are encouraged to be creative and seek out opportunities that might never have been thought of previously. Play opens doors not yet imagined.

The good news is that we are seeing shifts towards including more protected playtime within primary schools. For example, the International Baccalaureate Schools PYP program (The IB Community Blog) and many Singapore Mathematics curricula hinge on allowing children to use "Purposeful Play" as a best practice in learning in the classroom (Play Based Learning in Kindergarten) Play allows moments of discovery to be welcomed and celebrated within traditional classroom settings. Purposeful play cannot be the only play option for children. At the bare minimum, it must be in conjunction with open-ended child-initiated play opportunities in the classroom.

## Conclusion

Creating space for play in primary schools is not only feasible but mandatory. Children need teacher and administrator advocates within the schools, as well as parent and stakeholder advocates supporting schools. There is no shortage of information and research supporting the fact that play is developmentally critical for primary-age children at school. It is up to all of us to protect play in primary schools for the sake of our children.

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## The Significance of Choice: Empowering Students for Lifelong Learning

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### Introduction

The concept of choice has emerged as a potent tool for enhancing student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of providing students with autonomy and self-directed learning opportunities. Particularly within playful learning classrooms, where the focus is on fostering curiosity, creativity, and exploration, offering students the power of choice becomes indispensable.

Each day, students make 3,500 decisions to act, compared to a teacher's 35,000 decisions. However, only a tiny percentage of these actions include actions that they have decided to make. This lack of choice is problematic because choice, even minimal choices, like the option to use a pen or a pencil, can significantly impact student behavior and identity. Choice includes student's feelings of ownership over the experience and their level of self-motivation. Choice happens in learning when students set goals, develop and share ideas, make and change rules, negotiate challenges, and make decisions about collaborators and roles (how long they will work and when they will move around) (Harvard, n.d.).

Most definitions of play refer to choice or voluntary action, a requirement for something to be considered play (Lego, n.d.). Incorporating choice can improve learning and instruction at all levels of schooling. This essay explores current research on the significance of choice within playful learning environments and its impact on student learning and development.

### The Value of Choice

Research highlights many outcomes of incorporating choice into learning, including the benefits of fostering intrinsic motivation and ownership of learning, promoting student agency and empowerment, increasing achievement, personalizing

learning, cultural relevance, increasing the ability to make decisions and engage in self-regulation skills, and promoting autonomy.

**Motivation and Ownership:** Offering choices empowers students to take ownership of their learning journey, fostering intrinsic motivation and a sense of autonomy. Research by Patall, et al. (2020) suggest that when students have agency in selecting tasks or activities, they are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of engagement and persistence in completing them. Agency not only increases engagement but also supports building tenacity and stamina. Research indicates that when students are given autonomy and agency in their learning process, they exhibit higher levels of engagement and motivation. Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008) demonstrated that students who could choose their tasks showed greater intrinsic motivation and persistence than those who were assigned tasks.

In playful learning classrooms, where the emphasis is on self-directed exploration and discovery, the provision of choice catalyzes students' natural curiosity and enthusiasm for learning. Choice supports the overall goal of providing skills for students to be lifelong learners.

**Confidence:** A sense of ownership in play and school can lead children to feel confident and develop a sense of voice (Canning, 2020). A sense of ownership in children's play can lead to group cohesiveness in working together, coming up with creative solutions to problems, and children feeling able to express their personalities and emotions (Canning, 2020). Choice over play develops voice and supports children in coming to understand their preferences and identities. This collaborative play leads to an increased ability to demonstrate confidence in solving problems.

**Belonging:** This perceived acceptance and sense of value adds to students' sense of belonging in a classroom. School "belonging" focuses on students' perceptions and experiences of feeling respected, valued, liked, cared about, and known in school. Belonging in school is directly linked to attendance, achievement, and graduation rates. A study by Porter, McDermott, Daniels, and Ingram (2024) highlights that students who

feel a strong sense of belonging in their school environment are more likely to attend classes regularly, thus reducing absenteeism. St-Amand, Jurard, and Smith (2017) emphasize the significant impact of belongingness on academic achievement, indicating that students who perceive themselves as valued members of the school community tend to exhibit higher levels of motivation and engagement, leading to improved academic performance. A sense of belonging and autonomy in the curriculum also impacts a student's likelihood of graduating from high school.

**Cultural Relevance:** Integrating student choice not only impacts engagement and motivation, agency, academic motivation, and success, but it also provides a means for students to make connections to the content. In cases where teachers are required to use a mandated curriculum, choice can serve as a means for ensuring that the content is culturally relevant. Thus, not only are students able to explore topics of interest or present their learning in various ways, but they can also incorporate aspects of their own language and culture.

Offering choice in school settings supports teachers in ensuring that instruction is culturally relevant. Culturally relevant instruction emphasizes incorporating students' cultural backgrounds and experiences into the learning process. Studies by Ladson-Billings (2023) and Nesbitt et al. (2023) have demonstrated that offering students choices in their learning fosters a sense of autonomy and ownership. Educators can create more inclusive and engaging learning environments by allowing students to select topics, projects, or modes of expression that resonate with their cultural identities. Furthermore, in their work in the Handbook on Student Engagement, Reschly and Christenson (2022) suggest that choice promotes intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy, leading to increased academic achievement, particularly among students from marginalized communities. These findings underscore the significance of integrating choice to ensure culturally relevant pedagogy, as it empowers students to connect with their learning in meaningful ways and fosters a sense of belonging and agency within the classroom.



**Promoting Autonomy and Self-Regulation:** Besides fostering cognitive and emotional engagement, the power of choice nurtures students' autonomy and self-regulation skills. Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory posits that autonomy is a fundamental psychological need that drives intrinsic motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). By allowing students to make choices about their learning, educators empower them to take control of their educational journey, enhancing their sense of autonomy and self-efficacy. Moreover, making decisions and reflecting on their consequences cultivates essential self-regulation skills, such as goal setting, planning, and self-monitoring, which are crucial for academic success and lifelong learning. By acknowledging students' preferences and interests, teachers can foster a culture of collaboration, creativity, and mutual respect within the classroom.

**Developing Decision-Making Skills:** Encouraging students to make choices fosters the development of critical thinking and decision-making skills from an early age. By weighing options, considering consequences, and reflecting on outcomes, students learn valuable life skills that extend beyond the classroom (Brehm & Brehm, 2022). We know from the work on risky play that students with experience making decisions and taking risks are better at risk assessment (Hansen & Sandseter, 2023). Risky play offers developmental benefits by promoting children's ability to recognize and learn physical limits, increase independence, and better cope with environmental uncertainty and novelty (Jambor, 2021; Nikiforidou, 2017). This power to choose levels of risk leads to better decision-making skills and a greater sense of self-confidence.

Incorporating choice has many advantages, including fostering intrinsic motivation and ownership of learning, promoting student agency and empowerment, increasing achievement, creating a sense of belonging, ensuring instruction is culturally relevant, increasing the ability to make decisions and engage in self-regulation skills, and promoting autonomy. We now move to research-supported strategies for incorporating choice.

## Strategies for Incorporating Choice

The term choice, much like the term play, has many interpretations. Educators considering integrating choice into their instruction can envision a continuum of possibilities. Choice can be small, including which color to use when painting or which medium to use, crayons or watercolors. Choice can be letting a student choose the next child to share rather than the teacher. Choice can be incorporated in more significant ways, such as sharing ownership in the curriculum and how students present their learning. Rather than posting art projects in the hallway, families could be invited in to see an interpretive dance on the same topic. Research highlights strategies that have been successful in promoting student choice.

**Unstructured Play:** Creating opportunities for unstructured play is optimal for students to practice making choices. These opportunities to enact executive skills include deciding what to do when to do it, and how to respond to others. Another benefit is that the use of executive skills can allow children to experiment with words that may be novel by trying on language that may not be part of their home language. Recent research continues to affirm the profound impact of unstructured play on children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. A study by Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2023) underscores how free play promotes creativity and problem-solving skills, which are crucial for navigating complex environments. Gidado and Sulyman (2022) show that unstructured play fosters resilience and adaptability as students choose how to play and solve problems. Investigations by Aras (2016) reveal the role of free play in enhancing children's social competence, including their ability to negotiate conflicts and collaborate effectively. Each of these is done without adult guidance, although adults might join in the play and reiterate language, emphasizing the impact of the choices made.

**More than One Way:** The Pedagogy of Play (2016) group, which is focused on increasing opportunities for playful learning in early childhood through adolescent classrooms, asks teachers to explore more than one way of teaching and encouraging children to try more than one way of putting forth an idea. This process reminds us that

play for one may not be play for all. The Pedagogy of Play (2016) offers a wide variety of play opportunities and a wide range of ways to impart, receive, and demonstrate learning. The more than one-way approach reminds us that there are multiple ways to learn, behave, and be a person. Through modeling methods and encouraging students to try different solutions, the choice of methods leads to empowering, meaningful, and joyful learning experiences.

**Promoting Personalized Learning:** Choice allows educators to cater to diverse learning styles and preferences, promoting personalized learning experiences for each student. Teachers can better accommodate individual needs and interests by offering a range of options for assignments, projects, or learning pathways (Reeve & Jang, 2021). This developmentally appropriate practice supports students at different levels of development. It encourages choices in play, materials, modes of learning, and expression; children need not feel singled out. Instead, they may inspire other students to think or connect differently.

**Curriculum and Instruction:** Thinking differently about curriculum design and instruction can help to integrate choice. Teachers can integrate choice into lesson planning by offering alternative assignments, project topics, or learning resources that cater to diverse student interests and abilities. This approach promotes differentiation and ensures that all students have opportunities to thrive academically.

Along with instruction, providing students with choices of assessment methods can support individual development. Spinney and Kerr (2023) demonstrated that students strongly supported a choice-based assessment strategy. They found that it enabled them to focus on their strengths and interests, increased their level of engagement, and made them feel more responsible for their learning. Overall, most students felt empowered.

**Classroom Management and Structure:** Establishing clear expectations and guidelines for making choices within the classroom helps maintain order while empowering students to exercise autonomy responsibly. Teachers can implement

strategies like choice boards, flexible seating arrangements, and student-led discussions to scaffold decision-making skills. Consider how including student views in shaping the curriculum, the means of investigation, and the mode of sharing their findings can improve classroom culture. Burden (2020) suggests providing choices for all student assignments. Consider not only choices in setting goals and devising how the goal will be met but also choices in modes of communication and consequences for behavior.

**Teacher-Student Collaboration:** Collaboration between teachers and students is essential for effectively integrating choice into the curriculum. Teachers can solicit student feedback on their preferences, interests, and learning. Taking time to follow the lead based on a child's question could transform the engagement of the whole class. Negotiating curriculum with students can change their understanding of the content, as well as the relevance of the content to their lives. It can also enhance students' self-confidence, cooperation in class with teachers and peers, and enthusiasm for the subject matter (Guadalupe & Curtner-Smith, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

Choice is a key component of play for all ages. Incorporating choice in play-based learning has far-reaching implications for student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement. By embracing choice as a pedagogical principle, educators can create dynamic and inclusive learning environments where students thrive as active learners and contributors. As we continue to navigate the complexities of contemporary education, prioritizing choice empowers students to become lifelong learners equipped with the skills and agency to succeed in an ever-changing world.

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## Transitions To and Through School

**Kim Moroney**

Has the concept of “readiness,” as in “school readiness,” evolved to the point where the term is no longer connected to starting school? Has the re-conceptualisation finally moved away from expecting a child to be “ready” for something that is usually unknown or at least unfamiliar, to a now more nuanced understanding of transitioning to school and eventually transitioning through school? If so, is this re-conceptualisation understood by all stakeholders in prior to school and school settings, and is it communicated within society, especially to families?

Readiness is defined as “the state of being prepared” (Cambridge Dictionary), the state of being ready or prepared for something (Britannica Dictionary), and the quality or state of being ready (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The term school readiness has been the subject of significant debate across literature. The traditional notion of school readiness refers to the belief that a child should be “prepared” to enter formal schooling. The first year of formal schooling is labeled in a variety of ways in different parts of the world, and for the purpose of this paper, the first year of formal schooling is referred to as Kindergarten. This original concept of school readiness emphasised specific academic skills and developmental milestones, often overlooking the individualised and holistic nature of child development, learning, and wellbeing as well as fundamentals such as connection, belonging, safety, and inclusion.

Some elements of the traditional notion of school readiness include:

- An Academic Emphasis: Children know skills, such as counting, recognising letters and numerals, being able to write their name, identifying colours, and using scissors,
- A Checklist Mentality: Children need to meet a standardised set of criteria to be considered ready for school,
- Age-Based Readiness: Children being a certain chronological age, with the assumption that children of a certain age should be “ready” for school,
- Focus on Formal Learning: Children being able to engage in formal, structured

learning activities, moving away from play to more directed “pen and paper” instructed learning, particularly in Reading, Writing, and Mathematics,

- Child Responsibility: Children being solely responsible to “get ready” with minimal consideration about the role of parents/caregivers, family, and community,
- Minimal consideration of social-emotional well-being includes emotional safety, relationships, connections, belonging, co and self-regulation, empathy, and social interaction.

The first National Education Goal in the USA proclaimed, ' All children in America will start school ready to learn' (National Education Goals Panel, 1991). In the 1990s, the focus of this goal shifted from ready to learn to ready for school (Kagan, 1999), with theoretical perspectives as the basis of one’s understanding of school readiness (Meisels, 1999). An outcome of the National Education Goal was the identification of several dimensions to be considered when determining a child’s readiness for school (Dockett & Perry, 2002).

In the early 2000s, a shift in thinking occurred, recognising that school readiness does not reside solely in the child, but reflects the environments in which children find themselves (Kagan & Rigby, 2003) and that skill-based assessments of children’s functioning are poor predictors of subsequent school adjustment and achievement (La Paro & Pianta, 2001; Pianta & La Paro, 2003). It was recognised that children bring “funds of knowledge” to school, referring to the knowledge and experiences from within the context of family and community environments. This shift developed into a “readiness equation” with four connected components (Emig et al., 2001). The readiness equation being:

**Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Early Childhood Services + Ready Schools = Ready Children** (Kagan & Rigby, 2003).

**Ready Families:** The capacity of families, including the home learning environment they provide for children,

**Ready Communities:** The resources available within communities to support families and children,



**Ready Early Childhood Services (Prior to School Services):** The environments available to children in services and the importance of high-quality developmental opportunities,

**Ready Schools:** The ability of schools to consider their learning environments, pedagogy, and appropriate practice by engaging children and their families and being culturally responsive.

Dockett, Perry, and Kearney (2010) support the understanding that readiness should be conceptualised as a broad construct that incorporates all aspects of a child's life that contribute directly to that child's ability to learn. They emphasise that in addition to the child's readiness, the concept of school readiness also encompasses the school's readiness for the child and the capacity of families and communities to provide the necessary opportunities and support to optimise children's learning and development. The readiness equation has evolved into other variations with the same understanding, an example being:

**School Readiness = Ready Children + Ready Schools + Ready Families**

**Ready Children:** A focus on the child's development across domains such as cognition, social-emotional, physical, and language skills, recognising that each child develops at their own pace with unique capabilities, needs, and interests,

**Ready Schools:** A focus on schools creating welcoming, inclusive, and intentional indoor and outdoor environments that are responsive to the child's capabilities, needs, and interests. Teachers support diverse learners through their relationship with the child, appropriate pedagogy and evidence-based practices, and respectful communication with families,

**Ready Families:** A focus on families being actively involved in their child's education by establishing a strong partnership between the family and the school. Families have access to quality childcare prior to school services, as well as information and resources to support the child.

Readiness equations acknowledge that readiness involves a broad spectrum of developmental areas and environmental factors that collectively contribute to a child's

ability to thrive in a school setting. The relationships between professionals, the child, and their family, as the key stakeholders in the readiness equation, are important. They assist children in being 'ready' for school while also assisting schools in becoming 'ready' to accept all children regardless of their developmental progress (OECD, 2017).

Elements of the contemporary notion of school readiness include:

- Readiness encompasses a broader range of developmental domains, including social and emotional skills, physical health, cognitive development, and language abilities,
- Readiness is recognised as individualised, with children developing at different rates and in various ways. A child-centered approach that considers each child's unique capabilities, needs, and interests is more appropriate,
- Age is only one factor among many. Developmental milestones, socio-emotional maturity, and other contextual factors are crucial,
- Play and informal learning experiences are vital components of early childhood development,
- Social-emotional development is a critical domain for school readiness. Children need support in being able to manage their emotions, form positive relationships, and navigate social situations,
- The family environment, parental involvement, and access to early childhood education and resources play significant roles in preparing children for school,
- Good physical health, nutrition, and adequate rest are foundational for children's ability to effectively learn and participate in school activities.

### **The Concept of Transitions:**

Transitions are a process of continuity and change as individuals move into and through one state of being and belonging to another. Transitions occur over time and are unique to each individual, with major transitions recognised as turning points that significantly impact identity, behaviour, and expectations.

Transitions in relation to beginning school have been relevant for many decades and viewed as a key life cycle transition both in and outside school (Pianta & Cox, 1999), as

well as setting the tone and direction of a child's school career (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). Transitions to school are described in the literature as a rite of passage associated with increased status and as a turning point in a child's life (Christensen, 1998). Reframing 'school readiness' to 'transitions to school' involves a change in mindset. It acknowledges that education is not a one-size-fits-all approach, where children enter formal schooling with the same knowledge, skills, and life experiences (Marais, 2023).

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australia (birthplace of the author) entitled *Belonging, Being & Becoming V.2.0* (2022) supports early childhood providers, teachers, and educators to extend and enrich children's learning from birth to 5 years and through the *transition to school*. The EYLF does not mention 'school readiness'; however, it consistently uses the term 'transition to school' to describe the journey from home and prior to school and home to school and frames this journey as a collaborative effort where educators, teachers, families, and communities unite to support the child.

### **Transitions to School:**

Transitions to school are multidimensional and one of the most important in a child's life. When starting school, the child moves from a home and/or prior to the school setting where play and the child's interests have been foundational to their development, learning, and well-being. The child's family also undergoes the process of transition. Transitions occur over time, beginning before the child starts school and extending into kindergarten to the point where the child feels a sense of belonging and identity at school. The concept that transitions continue into the kindergarten year rejects the concept of "readiness." It focuses transitions on belonging and connections, so the child begins to identify themselves as a student. For all children, an effective transition to school is defined as establishing a sense of belonging at school for a child and their family (AERO, 2022; Allen et al., 2018).

Transitions offer both opportunities and challenges. It is important to recognise that when a child transitions to school, they are also transitioning away from what is

familiar and known. Although change is an obvious factor when transitioning to school, continuity is also most relevant. When children experience familiar or similar ways of being, doing, and learning from one setting to another, this continuity assists effective and positive transitions. For children with a disability or developmental delay, there may be additional diverse needs that require support in individualised ways when transitioning to school (Spencer-Brown, 2015). A commitment to meeting these needs reflects a rights-based approach to disability, underpinned by the rights of all children to access education (United Nations, 2006).

### **Evidence-based Components to Support Transitions to School:**

**Play:** Play is the bridge that provides the continuity between home and prior-to-school services to the school. The child who crosses the threshold to school does not become a different kind of learner. Play remains crucial for learning, development, and well-being, as well as for fostering creativity, social interaction, and cognitive growth. Play provides opportunities for the teacher to observe the child's funds of knowledge, rich capabilities, interests, and needs as they transition to school. Importantly, play provides the child with safety, security, and familiarity in a time of change.

### **School visits for the child and family to make meaningful connections:**

School visits support the development of relationships and meaningful connections, supporting the child and family to explore the school environment, meet teachers, gather information, and gain an understanding of school culture. It is important that parents/carers are included in these experiences and given opportunities to share information about their child. A carefully balanced number of transition experiences should emphasise quality over quantity. Too many visits remove the child from their current learning environment, making the process one of preparation rather than connection.

### **Reciprocal Visits between Schools and Prior to School Services:**

Relationships between educators and teachers promote collegial conversations and partnerships. As children make the major transition to school, it is beneficial if educators

and teachers from prior-to-school services and schools commit to sharing information so learning can continue to build on the foundations of earlier learning.

**School Environment:** Developing welcoming indoor and outdoor spaces inviting children to engage, explore, and respond is essential to positive transitions. All children need to be represented in the space, considering the children's cultural background and language and promoting inclusive practices that respect and integrate diverse cultural experiences and linguistic abilities. The design of spaces that enable gathering and movement, collaborative thinking, play, and intentional teaching, where resources and loose parts are accessible and intentional, are essential components of the school environment.

**Emotional Wellbeing and Safety:** The focus on children's emotional well-being and safety is a priority. An awareness of any “big emotions” the children may be feeling and how these emotions may be communicated through their words, actions, and behaviours. Children not only transition to school but also away from their prior-to-school service and relationships. It is essential to be aware of any discontinuity children may experience.

**Children as Transitions Experts:** Kindergarten children are transitioning to school as experts. Invite children from the current Kindergarten classes to talk about transitions to school from their perspective. They can draw/write/record their experiences in various ways to share with the new cohort of children and their families.

#### **Transitions through School:**

Transitions *through* school are also of significant importance. As students move through each school year and transition into the following year, they re-establish their identity as students, developing new relationships, connecting to different environments, processes, and practices, and understanding new curriculum expectations. This process is unique to each child and vital in re-establishing connection, inclusion, identity, and feelings of acceptance, safety, and belonging. Transitions through school years are often overlooked as another period of continuity and change.

### **The Re-conceptualisation from Readiness to Transitions:**

Shifting away from outdated notions of readiness to moving towards a readiness equation and ultimately moving to a nuanced understanding of transitions involves recognising the comprehensive and individualised nature of transitions, promoting supportive environments, and valuing the whole, agentic child in the context of their unique transitions journey.

Successful transitions to school lay solid foundations for positive partnerships and relationships with families that are important for the transition process and families' ongoing engagement with the school and in their child's learning, development, and well-being. High expectations for all children and families, coupled with recognition of the strengths and knowledge they bring, are cornerstones of effective transition-to-school approaches, regardless of the backgrounds of those involved (Dockett & Perry, 2021, 2014).

Transitions to school research and associated evidence-based practices are a global key policy initiative. While the concept of "school readiness" remains, it has evolved in many parts of the world, moving away from expecting a child to be "ready" to the readiness equations or the concept of transitioning to school. Ongoing research, conversations, and practices are needed to share the re-conceptualisation with all stakeholders prior to school and school settings and within the community. The multiple perspectives on transitions to school make it necessary to include the perspectives of children, families, educators, teachers, and community members and focus on the importance of collaboration, relationships, welcome and belonging, safety and trust, and strengths-based approaches within each local context.

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## Understanding the Crucial Role of Early Childhood in Developing Positive Dispositions Through Play

Deb Lawrence

Ask a group of early childhood teachers or administrators what the role of early childhood education is, and this will elicit several different responses, some of which may be a combination of the following: to care for children while their parents are working, to get children "ready" for the next age group, to foster children's development, to meet each child's individual needs, to provide a safe place, to create a love of learning, or to help them be successful in later life. This paper will explore the role of early childhood education and clarify its purpose.

Parents, schools, and society apply pressure on early childhood programs to prepare children for the academic rigors they will face in kindergarten and the primary grades. This situation has influenced many early childhood programs to move from child-initiated play-based programs to a more structured teacher-directed approach (Pennsylvania Department of Human Services & Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). Unfortunately, this emphasis on a teacher-directed approach does not align with developmental milestones or consider how children develop. Instead, it creates classrooms with unrealistic academic expectations and children who find learning too complex and tedious. As a result, teacher-directed classrooms have teachers seeing more behavior problems, resulting in physicians seeing more children who have anxiety or depression (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2007). These results contribute to the United States' test scores being lower than in other countries (Los Angeles Times, 2017). Clearly, something is not working. However, we can start to make a change by recognizing the importance of the teacher's and child's roles in the learning process and creating opportunities for children to acquire positive dispositions or approaches to learning.

### **What are the Dispositions or Approaches to Learning Through Play?**

Eleanor D. Brown (2013), in the book *Learning from Head Start*, reminds us that "all children are born with learning potential (p. 167)". Children are eager to understand their world and are full of curiosity. Helping each child reach their potential requires

adults who support them in developing positive dispositions. Dispositions of Learning, often referred to as Approaches to Learning, are best described as necessary for later school success. They are the least researched but most essential factor in children's acquisition of new knowledge. (Bredekamp, 1995). Dispositions or Approaches to Learning are life skills crucial to a child's development. These skills, starting from birth and continuing across the lifespan, enable children to gather and construct knowledge, organize and understand information, apply that knowledge, and transfer the information to future situations. Approaches to Learning or Dispositions are interchangeable terms that are the building blocks and prerequisites of a child's learning journey. (Pennsylvania Department of Human Services & Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014).

Approaches to Learning or the dispositions of learning describe behaviors, predispositions, or patterns children use in learning situations (Hyson, 2008). Some positive examples of Approaches to Learning include curiosity, exploration, discovery, flexibility, initiative, persistence, problem-solving, critical thinking, and flexibility. Approaches to Learning provide young children with the prerequisite skills necessary for success in the formal school years. Teachers must build supportive and positive relationships with children to achieve these behaviors and patterns. These supportive relationships provide a classroom climate where positive dispositions can flourish.

Unfortunately, Approaches to Learning or dispositions are environmentally sensitive. Children's experiences may inhibit the development of positive dispositions and instead promote the development of negative dispositions (Bertram & Pascal, 2002). Fear, adult disapproval, trauma, unrealistic expectations out of line with typical development, inappropriate teaching strategies, large group instruction, teacher-directed drills of skills, and a lack of opportunities for children to direct their play all contribute to the acquisition of negative dispositions. Common negative dispositions in children can include children being distracted, discouraged, disinterested, frustrated, overwhelmed, and detached (Lawrence, 2021).

Child-initiated play is necessary if early childhood education aims to foster and enhance each child's development. When children can direct their play, they follow their

interests to explore and make discoveries. These discoveries lead to pleasure and foster intrinsic motivation to repeat them. This repetition then leads to mastering skills that help promote a child's confidence and positive self-concept while increasing a child's self-esteem and motivating a child to be curious and repeat this learning cycle (Perry, 2001). Play is a powerful learning tool that enables children to grow and develop a love of learning. Play is a child's natural state of mind, prompting growth and development across all physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional domains (Pennsylvania Department of Human Services & Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). Play exemplifies the importance of the teacher's role in the classroom. Determining whether the teacher's role is to teach or to foster children's development is vital to making the changes necessary to support growth. Child-initiated play must be the primary mode of learning to promote the acquisition of positive dispositions and limit the acquisition of negative dispositions.

### **Classrooms Where Teachers Teach Vs. Classrooms Where Children Grow and Develop**

In classrooms where teachers teach, worksheets are used as teaching tools; the classroom clock enforces the daily schedule; the teacher provides information or activities in large groups; play is viewed as a break from academics; and teachers structure the curriculum by subjects, such as language arts, math, science, and social studies. Classroom centers limit the number of children allowed at any given time; teachers may assign children to centers and then rotate children through the centers in short increments of time, and, in addition to worksheets, technology such as Smart Boards, computers, iPads, or tablets, and YouTube channels, are the primary teaching tools. The daily schedule comprises 15-30-minute increments, necessitating the overuse of transitions, and art is used to create products aligned with the current theme. Negative dispositions abound in a classroom where teachers teach, and behavior challenges increase. Children do not have the opportunity to see learning as fun, engaging, and pleasurable, often viewing learning as hard, boring, overwhelming, and unattainable due to the mismatch between where each child is developmentally and unrealistic expectations. These factors intensify when teachers try to hurry children's

academic achievements or lack knowledge of child development. When teachers view play as a break from academics, children have no time to explore and discover. Additionally, the teaching strategies and available classroom materials may not promote hands-on learning.

In contrast, classrooms where children grow and develop include large blocks of time, at least 1-2 hours, several times daily for children to direct their play. These blocks of time are designed for exploration and discovery. Children can choose where to play, how long to stay in one center area, and with whom to play. The daily routine is consistent, but the timing of the routine is flexible and based on children's interests. Transitions are limited; teachers observe and listen to children's interests and know when to extend children's thinking without interrupting the children's play. The teacher uses knowledge of child developmental milestones to assess each child's development levels and creates small group play-based, hands-on activities individualized for each child. Teachers use inquiry and problem-solving to guide students' discoveries and scaffold development. Careful observation is required to achieve these classroom practices and discover what interests children. To be able to observe, teachers need to provide time and space for children to follow their interests through play. Finding opportunities to listen to the questions children are asking as they play can help teachers to identify a topic of interest and to plan the curriculum according to these interests. Reviewing the daily schedule to create opportunities for children to direct their learning is a place to start.

### **The Daily Rhythm versus a Daily Schedule is Needed**

When faced with the need for change in early childhood programs, always refer to Bev Bos's words, "Start in a corner" (Bev Bos, Video, Holmes, 1994). Incremental change contributes to lasting change. Begin by looking at the daily schedule and asking how to increase child-initiated blocks of time. Another good question to ask is what determines the daily schedule. Is it the clock? Is it the children? The hope is that the children's interests control the daily schedule. Next, ask how the daily schedule can be revised to limit transitions throughout the day so children can follow their interests without adult interference. Answering these questions can reveal areas that need

adjustment. Below is an example of a daily routine or rhythm that includes the consistent flow of the day necessary for children to feel safe, know what comes next, and provides large blocks of time for play.

Possible Daily Rhythm – 6:30 am - 6:00 pm (Times are listed for demonstration purposes only. Keep the routine, but be flexible)

- 6:30 - 8:00 – child-initiated centers, breakfast offered as a choice
- 8 - 8:20- Morning Circle: Not mandatory- Read a book, sing, finger plays, introduction to small group activities during child-initiated centers.
- 8:30 - 10:30 child-initiated centers with snack as a center choice. Within this two-hour block, the teacher can facilitate a small group play-based active learning activity or teach a concept that children can choose as one of their choices.
- 10:30-10:45 cleanup
- 10:45-11:45- outside
- 11:45-12:30 - circle and lunch
- 12:30 - 2:30 - nap
- 2:30- 4:30—Centers are the same as in the morning, with another teacher-initiated play-based, active learning activity and an afternoon snack as a center. Cleanup and getting ready for outside are also included.
- 4:30 – 5:30 – outside
- 5:30 – 6:00 - end of day circle, stories, singing (Lawrence, 2021)

In this example, the intentional teacher facilitates small group guided play experiences as a choice, allowing children large blocks of time to engage and repeat activities, strengthening their positive dispositions. The school day has fewer transitions, allowing children to increase their attention spans. Though children have lots of time to initiate play, the role of the teacher in this daily schedule is critical to children's development.

**Setting the Stage: The Role of the Environment**

How does a teacher limit large groups to one or two times per day and allow all classroom centers to be open and available for exploration and discovery? How can the teacher ensure enough materials are available to keep children engaged? In the experience of coaching teachers to foster more play in the classroom, the coach often sees learning centers that only engage children for a short period of time. In these classrooms, materials are limited. Consider that instead of having ten different manipulatives with 20 or 30 pieces, consolidate each manipulative throughout the program and have five in each classroom with lots of pieces that keep children interested in building and creating over an extended time. This strategy allows teachers to rotate materials, thus increasing children's continued interest in exploring. In the other centers in the classroom, how is curiosity promoted? Are there enough blocks in the block area to hold children's interest? Are block accessories included so children can incorporate animals, people, cars, and ramps? In dramatic play/housekeeping, does this area include materials related to the books available that align with a topic children are interested in learning? In housekeeping or dramatic play, are there pots, pans, dishes, and babies so they can imitate what they see at home? How often are materials rotated? In the creative art center, is playdough available every week? Are there rolling pins, cookie cutters, child scissors, straws, popsicle sticks, and plastic knives for children to use with the playdough? Is the easel available every day? Are there various collage materials in the art area that children can use to create their artwork? In the language/literacy/book area, are there large floor puzzles, table puzzles, puppets, and flannel stories so children can retell a story? Are various books available that represent the children in the classroom? In the science center, what will entice children to come? Are there exciting materials to explore and manipulate? Can they dissect or explore things like real plants or other nature-based materials? Are loose parts incorporated into the classroom? Consider adding loose parts where children can use their imagination and creativity. Can children move materials from one classroom area to another? Children do not see the boundaries of center areas that the teacher has developed. They are using their imagination and creativity to expand ideas.

*The classroom teacher's role is to refrain from sitting and watching learning occur. The intentional teacher monitors children's play, listens for opportunities to extend*

*conversations, asks open-ended questions, observes and records children's growth, plans the curriculum to match children's interests, and always considers how to scaffold development. Child-initiated play is an active time for teachers to observe or work with a small group of children on a new game, concept, or skill (Lawrence, 2013).*

Classroom teachers who have the confidence to allow children to follow their interests demonstrate that they understand child development, respect the uniqueness of each child, and are committed to helping all children develop at their own pace. Though the official title may be teacher, the role is more of a facilitator. Teachers facilitate children's development by expanding their interests, engaging in their play (when invited), fostering children's self-esteem and confidence by trusting them to lead their learning, and providing support versus direction when assisting children in resolving conflicts. Intentional teachers plan curriculum based on children's developmental levels and interests and build a community of highly motivated and competent children who feel respected, heard, and valued for who they are as individuals. This scenario is a sharp contrast between the role of the teacher in a rigid routine controlled by the clock and the role of the intentional teacher in a developmentally effective classroom that recognizes the value of play and creates an environment where children thrive.

As a director and coach, observing a classroom and listing the positive and negative dispositions observed provided the framework for making change. Below is a list of positive and negative dispositions to assess the classroom environment and teacher interactions.

Positive Dispositions or Approaches to Learning	Negative Dispositions or Approaches to Learning
Curiosity	Distracted

Interest	Discouraged
Pleasure	Gives up easily
Intrinsic Motivation	Selfish
Attention	Impatient
Persistence	Intolerant
Engaged	Avoidant
Flexible	Detached
Self Regulation	Bored
Cooperates	Disinterested
Problem solves	Frustrated
Creative	Dependent
Asks questions	Apathy
Investigates	Fear
Seeks answers	Hesitant
Initiative	Withdrawn
Independent	Uncertain



Loves learning	Apprehensive
Demonstrates competence	Inept
Confident	Tentative
Perseveres	Overwhelmed

Using these positive and negative dispositions as a starting point can assist in identifying areas for change. For example, if a director or curriculum specialist is observing in a classroom, using this chart to identify current positive and negative dispositions that are present can lead to validating what the teacher is doing well and discussing where improvements could be made to eliminate the development of negative dispositions.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, intentional teachers support children's development by providing a consistent but flexible daily routine, an enriched environment with exciting materials, building positive relationships, and using teaching strategies that see play as the primary way to foster positive dispositions or approaches to learning. This focus moves away from a "readiness" mindset by providing time and space for children to grow and flourish in an exciting, joyful, responsive classroom that promotes curiosity, exploration, and discovery.

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## Kindergarten And Play

Peter Dargatz

Kindergarten is definitely not what it used to be. When German educator Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) started the first kindergarten, Garden of Children, in 1840, he emphasized, "Children are like tiny flowers; they are varied and need care, but each is beautiful alone and glorious when seen in the community of peers." He would be more than disappointed in a great deal of what he would see in kindergarten classrooms today. The power of play seems to have been replaced by the pressure of performance. Academic achievement trumps the social and emotional development nurtured through play and is needed for successful adjustment to the classroom community.

### **How and why did this happen?**

In the groundbreaking report "Crisis in the Kindergarten," researchers warned that kindergarten in the United States had radically changed over the past two decades and that "developmentally appropriate learning practices" centered on play, exploration, and social interactions had been replaced with highly prescriptive curricula, test preparation, and an explicit focus on academic skill building. It called for a "reversal of the pushing down of the curriculum that has transformed kindergarten into de facto first grade" (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 63).

While many feel an academic-centric kindergarten is not developmentally effective, many others think exposure to higher levels of academic content during the early childhood experience has benefits that enhance and deepen student understanding. But as with pretty much everything else that people can debate and debate and debate, what's the sweet spot? What is the balance that will benefit children and their overall development the best it could be?

While many feel a re-introduction (and in some cases) introduction of a play-based approach is the answer, it's best to more closely analyze why play is often replaced with academics in the classroom. The answer might actually be found outside of the classroom.

Society, in general, has put less and less emphasis on the power of play for a myriad of reasons. The overscheduling of children often squashes their ability to create and engage in play. When running from appointment to practice to rehearsal and back again, the longer stretches of uninterrupted time needed for the development of creative play are non-existent for many children. Parental perspectives can also inhibit play. Parents and caretakers can struggle with how children engaged in play reflects on their overall responsibilities. In other words, parents seem more inclined to be more directly involved in their children's lives, often stunting their children's ability to find play in their everyday lives. Parents who aren't actively involved may seem apathetic and lazy, even though providing space for children to navigate their own development as independently as possible is healthy and very play-appropriate. There is also the threat of danger. In some situations, it just might not be the safest option to allow the children to find play in their neighborhoods. In other cases, the threat may be overblown and an overreaction. Still, in a "better be safe than sorry" world, play opportunities are often eliminated or lessened to avoid potential issues with a perceived dangerous world. The onset of accessible technology can also affect how children play, especially when time in front of a screen replaces creative and curious opportunities for play.

These factors have similar impacts in today's classroom. Whether it be a lack of time, the perception that the teacher is unmotivated and apathetic and purposely inserts play to waste time that could be better used for academics, or the need to entertain children to eliminate boredom and stifle curiosity, play seems to be on the verge of extinction in the kindergarten classroom.

In the classroom, more and more precious minutes of the school day, once dedicated to play and student choice, are now being used in more scripted curricula, test preparation, and more academic-focused lessons and activities. With barely enough time to cover the increasing expectations and learning objectives being asked of our youngest learners, setting aside time for free play is sometimes an afterthought in fear that it will inhibit students from teaching their academic requirements. On a similar note, with the pressure to perform impacting the way students learn, there is an equally paralyzing impact on the way teachers teach. Teachers are often forced to choose between what they are required to do and what they feel is best for the students in their

care. While many understand play and choice are integral to overall student development, their hands may be figuratively tied to the constraints of the curriculum they are required to utilize in their classrooms.

While the above paragraph mentioned time (or the lack thereof) as a reason for the lack of play in the kindergarten classroom, another disturbing trend exists. The increasing role academics play in early childhood classrooms is becoming increasingly accepted (and expected). Many in society feel that schools and the students they serve are falling behind, requiring a more significant push at the earliest levels to catch children up. With increased time and resources for this goal, something has to give. Often, this is play. There is no time to play when there are objectives to master, tests to prepare for, and school-based goals needed in order to receive funding and garner the favor of the community and decision-makers. Schools and teachers don't want to be seen as the weakest link. No one wants to be perceived as not living up to these expectations, even if the expectations are unrealistic and inappropriate. It's a race to the finish. But what is that finish? Is this finish the end of play? It doesn't have to be.

This trend can and should be reversed. Unpacking the power of play is an essential ingredient to successful child development. By applying logical play-based principles, understanding and applying research-based strategies, and simply allowing children to be children through play will make a huge difference in a school climate without sacrificing achievement.

Prioritizing what kids need is the core of this shift. Kids need to play. For their social development. For their emotional health. For their physical strength. Believe it or not, it is for their academic skills. Classrooms must dedicate time and resources to providing play opportunities for every student in every setting. Purposefully inserting play into the schedule and making play a routine rather than a reward is a significant first step. Rethinking classroom design, both indoor and outdoor, is also essential to creating safe spaces for children to use play to inspire creativity and community. Using observation while students are engaged in play is a necessary and helpful tool to see how play can enhance student learning opportunities.

Above all, kindergarten classrooms can return to being playful powerhouses by remembering Friedrich Froebel's words: "Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul."

So what can we do? By we, I mean parents, teachers, administrators, community stakeholders, and most important of all, students. Individually, we can think outside the box, but collectively, we can obliterate it. It's time to speak up about what needs to change. It's time to question things that aren't productive or positive for students and families. It's time to stand up against what is unnecessary and overappreciated. It's time to put students ahead of statistics. It's time to take that outrage and turn it into opportunity.

Parents speak up. Though teachers want what's best for children, we often feel confined or confused by what our job requires. But we're willing to listen. Find a teacher in your school who will chat. I guarantee they'll be excited to hear a parent's perspective about making changes, whether about going outside, the power of play, or some other passion.

Most importantly, we must work together to get the ball rolling and make change happen. If you can't find a teacher, connect with an administrator. Or take a more active role in a parent-teacher organization. Find other like-minded parents. You may feel like no one is listening, but if you don't say anything, there is zero chance you will be heard. Never stop prodding.

Teachers speak up. You know what is best for kids, yet you also know that some of what you are required to do doesn't fit that description. Do your research. Be ready to share personal examples. Want to go outside? Research. Want to play more? Research. Decision-makers love data. Data seems to run the world these days, so you might as well use it to your advantage. Connect with other teachers. Listen to your families. Listen to your students. Listen to your heart. Be willing to change what you do, even if it ruffles feathers. Never stop pushing.

Administrators, speak up. Your school might need a shake-up. You might feel and see stress in students, teachers, and families. You're not alone. Listen to your staff. Embrace innovative and risky approaches. Allow flexibility and freedom in your classrooms. Let the passion and art of teaching drive your school. Believe and trust that

teachers will do what's best for their children by doing what's best for all the teachers. Be firm and fair. Set an example of passion for your staff, students, and families. Never stop pressing.

Community stakeholders, speak up. Reach out to schools. Learn what they are doing and, more importantly, find out what they need. Learn how you can get involved. Education takes a group effort and funding. Using your time, talent, and treasure will pay off now and in the future. Community collaborations set up schools and students for success. Never stop participating.

Students, speak up! Talk to your parents. Talk to your teachers. Talk to your administrators. Be active in your community. Speak up for what you believe in. Share what you need. Understand that risk is necessary and that not everything is easy. Appreciate the "F" word—failure promotes growth. As cliché as it sounds, you are the future, so you might as well personally invest yourself in getting there. Trust your parents. Trust your teachers. Above all, trust yourself. Listen more than you speak, but don't be silent. And regardless of anything you hear from anyone else, take this last piece of advice to heart. Never stop playing!



## Academic Pushdown

Heather Bernt-Santy

### PROBLEM STATEMENT

Young children in early childhood settings in the United States are experiencing increasing pressure to demonstrate academic achievement at increasingly early ages. This phenomenon is often referred to as the **academic pushdown**. State early learning standards and professional preparation guidelines create programs where children under the age of five are subjected to academic expectations that would be more appropriate for older children. The negative impacts on children demand our attention.

### ISSUES

One negative impact is the loss of free play opportunities for young children. Increased political and cultural pressure for early academic performance has contributed to the loss of play in early childhood. The mythology of teaching academic concepts earlier and earlier to solve workforce issues, societal inequities, and international competition shortfalls has led to changes in how our early childhood programs are equipped and arranged, as well as in teaching methods and curriculum goals. As our early childhood spaces began to look more like elementary school classrooms, young children's days became more regimented, scheduled, and focused on adult priorities. Play is less recognizable to lay stakeholders and teachers of older children as a valuable use of childhood time or as an avenue for learning, and so it is not prioritized. When childhood is reduced to data points, child-chosen free play disappears.

When independent choice and free play are removed from children's lives, their mental health is at risk. In academic-focused early childhood settings, effective teaching is measured by whether all children reach the same standards in the same time frame. The individual child disappears or is only seen as a measurement of success or failure. Attempts to standardize children, therefore, disrupt healthy, positive relationships (a key factor for mental health and resilience) between adults and children. These disrupted or

prevented relationships impact children's psychological well-being as the focus on standardizing over individual needs and interests impairs identity development. In a report for *Defending the Early Years*, Carlsson-Paige et al. (2015) report long-term harm, especially in social and emotional development, from overly directive preschool instruction (p. 4). Peter Gray (2011) also suggests that the decline of play in childhood can be linked to a rise in anxiety and depression in children and adolescents and identifies increased academic expectations as a contributing factor to the decline of play (p. 447). Kerry McDonald (2018) cites a Harvard study that connects too-early schooling, with its unrealistic academic and behavioral expectations, to an increase in preschool-aged children being "labeled with or medicated for delays and disorders that often only exist within a schooled context" (p. 4).

Third, the academic pushdown has a negative impact on adults working with young children in early childhood settings. Early care and education practitioners and their expertise have lost legitimacy as a results-driven culture gains power over early care and education programming and provision. Adults working with young children experience high levels of stress as mandates prevent teachers from "using much of the most important basic information they know about how best to meet the diverse developmental needs of young children in individualized ways, through active engagement with hands-on materials" (Levin & Van Hoorn, 2018, p. #35). This increases the stressors practitioners face in the same ways that the loss of play and agency increases stressors for young children.

## **BACKGROUND**

The academic pushdown can be attributed to a series of cultural and political events that have contributed to a culture of panic and competition. This section will identify major events that have contributed to a shift away from those who shared an understanding of children and started with the child to those in occupations and professions outside the academic domain who prioritized subject matter (Elkind, 2010). What follows is a timeline of these events (Keskin, 2018, pp. 1-2):

- In 1957, Russia successfully launched the first Earth satellite, beating the United States to this achievement. Fear spread that the education system could not compete with its rivals.
- In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as part of his War on Poverty, believing that the legislation would diminish achievement gaps for low-income children.
- Beginning in the 1970s, states began implementing more prekindergarten and kindergarten programs, and rote learning, memorization, whole-class instruction, and skill/drill practices became more prevalent in early childhood settings.
- In 1983, the United States Department of Education published *A Nation at Risk*, warning of the mediocrity of the education system and adding to fears that we were falling behind other nations
- In 2001, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act. Its reliance on accountability and standardized testing increased the academic pressures pushed down into early childhood settings.
- In 2012, President Barack Obama's Race to the Top launched, creating competition at school district levels and focusing on standards and assessments to measure student growth and success while informing teachers on improving instruction. As part of this mandate, states were required to develop early learning standards.
- In 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act, reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act.

We continue to see efforts to politicize and standardize young children's education in the Biden administration, as seen in the *Early School Success Dear Colleague Letter* issued in February 2024 by Secretary of Education Miguel A. Cardona, touting the importance of "high quality" (often used as a euphemism for academic focus in preschool) PreK experiences to ensure "alignment" with later school standards—an example of Elkind's concern that goals for young children are being informed by subject matter, not by the child.

## APPROPRIATE APPROACHES/STRATEGIES

In their 2018 publication for the American Academy of Pediatrics, Yogman et al. offer guidance for preschool education on the benefits of play for young children. They suggest a necessary frame shift from direct adult instruction to support for play in an effort to cultivate a broader range of development than the academic pushdown addresses. The authors suggest that kindergarten should provide children with opportunities for “playful collaboration and tinkering.” Play provides these opportunities authentically and often. If this is their recommendation for kindergarten, it follows that this frameshift should also be “pushed down” into programming and provision for children birth to 5.

A white paper published by the Lego Foundation in 2017 supports a rejection of the academic pushdown by defining five characteristics that support brain development and learning:

- Joyful: Joy invokes a positive effect that enables many higher cognitive functions. Increased dopamine levels positively impact memory, attention to goals, motivation, curiosity, and creativity.
- Meaningful: Engaging in exploration that is meaningful to them, they move learning from effortful to automatic. Their skill in analogical reasoning, knowledge transfer, and metacognition is strengthened.
- Actively engaging: When the child is actively engaged in an experience, it demands both attention and response. These types of experiences are associated with neural networks involved with attention control, goal-directed behavior, long-term memory retrieval, and stress regulation.
- Iterative: When children are allowed, or *expected*, to repeat thoughts or actions during their experiences, there is potential for new discovery with each repetition. They develop skills in perseverance, perspective-taking, and cognitive flexibility.
- Socially interactive: All learning and development is impacted by social experiences. As the authors of the white paper contend, the same serve and

return functions that impact our visual and auditory abilities also impact our cognitive, social, and emotional regulation later in life.

These five characteristics are most authentically and, therefore, most effectively provided for young children through free play. While adults may be able to guess what might be joyful, meaningful, and actively engaging for a child, the surest way to provide experiences like those described by the authors is to create spaces for a child's agentic behavior. In settings informed by the academic pushdown, legitimate opportunities for the provision of these five characteristics are rare.

## **CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS**

- IPA-USA and other organized play advocates should develop agreed-upon definitions of “play” and “learning” that are developmentally informed for children birth to 8 years old.
- Alternatives to state early childhood standards should be developed for developmentally informed support of math, literacy, science, movement, social and emotional development.
- Kindergarten Readiness should be formally defined, focusing on developing executive function skills and developmentally responsive kindergartens.
- Claims of “evidence base” should be questioned whenever they are raised. Does the study from which the evidence is drawn focus on adult goals and priorities or on the healthy development of children?
- Higher education early childhood education programs should include comprehensive content related to play

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## Choice During the Day

Peter Dargatz

### **Introduction**

Everyone loves options. Not everyone wants to be told what to do in every situation. People who are different should be allowed to express those differences in a manner that best suits them rather than try to fit into a "one size fits all" world.

In today's classroom, as expectations continue to rise and the pressure to perform is growing, we can offset this pressure by focusing on student choice. While we might not be able to instantly overhaul the educational system into one that is more developmentally effective, recognizing the power of student choice and putting that power into action is a reasonable first step.

### **What Exactly is Student Choice?**

Student choice is an innovative and personalized learning approach to instruction that promotes engagement and empowerment. It doesn't necessarily focus solely on simply learning facts. It goes well beyond learning by allowing students the opportunity to discover what they want to learn. It doesn't necessarily alter the required learning objectives or change the outcomes but allows for freedom and options in how students can reach them. Choice gives students the power to display their understanding in a manner that best suits their ability and learning style. It shifts the power and responsibility of learning from a more teacher-dominated classroom to one that empowers students and inspires independent learning.

### **How Does Choice Work?**

In short, students are given a choice in what they learn, how they learn it, and how they demonstrate that learning. "With opportunities to choose for themselves, kids can channel curiosities into responsible decision-making that has immediate benefits" (Larmand, 2022. Blog Post). Deciding on what they want to learn helps children cultivate curiosity. Using self-direction, students have more ownership over their learning and are more likely to excel in that learning because of their more powerful role in its design. Student choice gives students the opportunity to choose the materials and

the resources they will utilize to explore topics of their own choosing. Teachers are seen more as facilitators and offer advice and insight, not direct instruction or specific guidelines. Because students have more of a role in their learning, they will be more accountable for the planning and implementation of their own learning.

### **This Sounds Great, but Does it Improve Learning?**

When teachers incorporate choice, students become lifelong learners and retain information at a much higher retention rate. Students enjoy what they are doing and learn more in the process because they are more directly involved and empowered by it. Student choice taps into multiple learning styles and encourages positive behaviors by giving more power and responsibility directly to the student. Student choice encourages a positive learning atmosphere where all students are involved and engaged.

### **So Why Isn't Student Choice the Norm?**

Quite frankly, traditional classrooms tend to create routines and processes that become the norm and are tough to change. There is also the fact that teachers and schools are directly tied to the success of their students when analyzed through the eyes of a prescribed curriculum. Many educators hesitate to give up their perceived power and put it in the hands of learners, who are often considered inexperienced and immature. This isn't too hard to believe when the results of that learning are directly tied to how the teacher is evaluated and even retained. Teachers strive to do what is best for their students. Still, they are also responsible for delivering required instruction across multiple curricular areas while preparing students for a myriad of mandated assessments. Their hands are somewhat tied, but that doesn't mean they can't work to loosen the shackles that are holding them back from doing what they know is best for children.

### **Conclusion**

Understanding the power of choice will motivate schools and educators to implement choice. By starting small, educators can work to find a healthier balance between what is best for kids and continuing to complete their seemingly ever-growing list of teaching responsibilities. Strategies for implementing choice can be used across



all grade levels. Simple strategies like flexible seating, prioritizing choice time in the schedules, and providing options are a great start. With time, effort, and a focused approach to finding ways to empower students, choice can become exactly what it was meant to be. Choice can be how and why students learn.

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## Executive Function is Key to Success

Myae Han & Rosa Mykyta-Chomsky

### Problem Statement

Executive Functioning (EF) skills are essential skills that help children navigate their daily lives. EF skills help children control their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and process complex ideas. To be successful in the long term, children need EF skills to control themselves and perform tasks well. People describe these skills in multiple ways, but most emphasize five subskills (e.g., Eberhart et al., 2023; Obradovic et al., 2018): *inhibitory control*, *working memory*, *cognitive flexibility*, *organizational skills*, and *emotional control*.

First, *inhibitory control* means staying focused on the task at hand and following directions. *Working memory* is the ability to keep track of and follow multi-step instructions or complex topics, for example, remembering and applying the order of operations in a math problem. *Cognitive flexibility* is a skill that supports an understanding that there are multiple ways to do or experience a task. *Organizational skills* support children in planning and organizing space, materials, and tasks to better achieve their goals. Last, *emotional control* means the ability to recognize and respond to one's emotions, both positive and negative (Obradovic et al., 2018).

These five EF skills help children develop the ability to regulate themselves and process events and activities to succeed in social and academic settings. There has been strong evidence from research studies that EF skills play an important role in academic achievement at all ages. Researchers suggest that EF skills, especially as addressed through childhood and adolescence, support academic success through an educational career (Fuhs et al., 2014; Samuels et al., 2016; Thorell et al., 2013). EF skills have been argued to be a central component of social-emotional development (Davies et al., 2021), promoting later success in social relationships and emotional well-being (Fuhs et al., 2014; Samuels et al., 2016; Thorell et al., 2013) as well.

There is evidence that children develop EF skills in play contexts because play provides a rich environment for children to practice EF skills while they implement their ideas during the play and with their playmates (Berk & Meyers, 2013; Lillard et al., 2012;

Thibodeau et al., 2016; Veraksa et al., 2022). In the process of developing EF, it has been found that the most productive development happens in early and middle childhood. It is most effective when the development is embedded into children's everyday routines, such as play (Blair, 2016). A growing collection of voices has been arguing for the importance of play in the course of EF development (Eberhart et al., 2023; Hodges et al., 2022).

Unfortunately, the amount of time children spend playing has decreased significantly over the past two decades, leaving many researchers and educators concerned about the development of EF skills and their cognitive, physical, and emotional development (Gray, 2011; Hodges et al., 2022).

## **Background**

As stated by Professor Peter Gray (2011), children learn how to make decisions, solve problems, exert self-control, and follow rules through play, each of which is a component of EF. According to Vygotsky's theory (1978), the symbolic play that emerges in early childhood and continues as children grow is key to the development of EF, a child's ability to regulate their own behavior. Symbolic play is also known as make-believe, pretend, role, fantasy, or dramatic play (Han, 2015). Through these kinds of make-believe play, children develop inhibitory and emotional control, as well as cognitive flexibility, planning, and organizational skills through the scenarios they contrive in which they follow the rules and behave in ways designed by their understanding of the social interactions they observe (Vygotsky, 1978).

Researchers provide strong evidence that part of what makes make-believe play so beneficial to the development of EF is that by partaking in make-believe play, children are making and following rules. It is not the existence of rules that limits EF, but rather how the rules are implemented. A study of Russian kindergarten children by Veraksa and colleagues (2022) examined play interventions and how they impacted EF scores. The results showed a significant difference between EF scores across all domains for various types of play, including adult-directed play, child-directed play, and board games. These results were in line with the findings by Berk and Meyers (2013) nearly a decade earlier, showing that the lowest development in EF came from

adult-directed play. Although board games also significantly changed scores, child-directed free play had the largest impact on EF scores. Depending on the nature of the adult-child relationship, adult involvement in play with children may either inhibit or support EF development, indicating the complex nature of play, EF development, and the role of adults in both (Berk & Meyers, 2013).

Another study in early childhood similarly found that the more highly fantastical (or imaginative) and child-directed the play was, the greater the gains in EF skills were for children (Thibodeau et al., 2016). When children engage in fantasy play, they need to construct new realities out of their imagination, inferring new roles, new role relationships, and pretend actions. This is why fantasy play is considered a higher level of play, as it requires children's thinking to extend beyond the familiar (Han, 2015). When children engage in fantasy play by creating their own rules and ideas and following them, it becomes more challenging to play with their peers.

Without strong EF skills, their play often deviates from their plans and stops abruptly. This underscores the critical role of EF skill development in successfully executing fantasy play among children. It is also important to note that EF skill development is higher in child-directed play. One study by Thibodeau and colleagues (2016) has found that adult-guided play and play with rules implemented by a factor other than the child (e.g., rules in board games) limits EF development in some capacity with no significant change in EF scores for children who participate in non-imaginative, or controlled play. While games with rules may help children develop some EF skills, the highest levels of EF skill development often arise from make-believe play, such as socio-dramatic play and social fantasy play.

### **Strategies and Approaches**

Understanding that the best way to support EF development through play is through socio-dramatic and social fantasy play, adults must provide children with more opportunities to engage in such play at home and at school. Here are some strategies adults can use to support children's EF skills through play.

- Provide children with materials, settings, and time to engage in make-believe play. Research has shown that child-directed fantasy or

dramatic play has the largest impact on the development of EF. One simple way for adults to support such play is to provide the time, environment, and materials for that type of play to exist (Han & Christie, 2001; Huisman, 2014). Provide a play space and setting such as house play, doctor's office play, grocery store play, outer space play, and story/folktale-based play.

- Provide open-ended materials for self-active and self-directed play. Open-ended materials such as blocks and cardboard boxes can be used in multiple ways and for multiple types of play. For example, blocks are good open-ended materials. Blocks require creativity and can be used to fulfill all sorts of needs designed by the playing child. They also support almost all of the EF domains (Huisman, 2014). Organizational skills in arranging the blocks, cognitive flexibility skills in finding alternative options when construction becomes wobbly, and even emotional control if it all comes crashing down develop and are used during building a block tower, playing house, or creating a miniature city.
- Be aware of the role of adults. For dramatic play specifically, children need playmates to truly support EF development in the home setting requiring parental participation (Elias & Berk, 2002). This requires that parents participate in the play as a co-player without taking control and leading the play (Elias & Berk, 2002). Beyond just guiding play, children rely on interactions with peers to fully build their self-regulation skills through their dramatic play (Elias & Berk, 2002). Children do not necessarily have peers to interact with when playing in the home, so the role parents take in the play is ever more important.
- Adults need play training as well. To support child-directed play for better development of EF skills, adults need to understand both what that type of play looks like and how to support it, and in many cases, how to participate as a co-player without inhibiting the children's ideas (Han, 2015). Although educators, especially in early childhood settings, recognize the importance of play, they often struggle with implementation.

The urge to interrupt, dominate, or lead the play for their children can distract from the goal: that the play is child-led. Common challenges include over-stepping, limiting the children's control over their play, and not providing a rich environment in which the play can be fostered (Hodges et al., 2022; Vu et al., 2015). Researchers underscore the need for adult training on their roles during play and how to facilitate children's play (Han et al., 2023). One major challenge early childhood educators face in implementing child-directed social-imaginative play into their classrooms is that they, the educators, often feel the impetus to guide the play or feel the pressure that the play may not be perceived as productive regardless of their own beliefs. Adults need in-depth knowledge of play and how to support play. An effective play training for adults has been identified (Han et al., 2023). Pre- and in-service professional development on designing and implementing play for EF skill development is needed. Providing teachers with a better understanding of play and ways to implement imaginative play specifically but play more generally in their classroom will provide children with the types of play that benefit EF development most.

- Educators ought to prioritize increased play time within the school day. Beyond the need for teachers to know how to set up and engage children in play, the school day needs to include more time for play in general. In the United States, the last two decades have seen a drastic decrease in the amount of time allotted to play throughout the school day (Christie, 1990; Gray, 2011; Han et al., 2023). Many kindergartens do not have dramatic play areas, and even recess, a chance for free play, has diminished (Hodges et al., 2022). With chances for dramatic, imaginative, child-led play decreasing in school settings and teachers being under-trained in how to implement child-directed play, the development of EF skills may need support. Gray (2011) argues that these declines in and challenges to child-led play lead to higher psycho-pathology for adolescents. Long-term impacts like this may indicate other long-term impacts like the inhibition of EF development.

## **Conclusion**

Adults have a responsibility to provide the materials and create the time and space for children to engage in socio-dramatic and social fantasy play; thus, children have an opportunity to develop EF skills safely and effectively. This should include both the materials for children to engage in play representing the spaces they are familiar with for their socio-dramatic play and open-ended materials such as blocks to enhance their self-active play. Schools need to provide time during the day for play, and parents need to prioritize unscheduled time in which children can play at home. In addition, the adults must understand how to participate in the play as a co-player, letting the children lead the action. Receiving play training in order to recognize and respond to different types of play while still letting the play be child-guided is a good way to better understand the role of adults in play.

For creating the best environment for socio-dramatic or social fantasy play, teachers and parents can provide a setting that reflects a space that children are familiar with (a doctor's office, grocery store, post office, or even a house) or unfamiliar with (outer space, fantasy story). Settings children have been to and are familiar with where they can step into existing roles, knowing the actions and routines of that role traditionally (Han et al., 2023). Unfamiliar settings can encourage children to use their imagination and be more creative in their play. Adults can similarly step into roles in this type of play, not impeding a child's choices or imagination. Settings can be built with relevant materials (a play kitchen, for example, in a game of House) or repurposed for a new setting (the play kitchen tools used for a doctor's office in different ways). Open-ended materials such as blocks or cardboard boxes, which can be used to design structures, toilet paper, or paper towel rolls, provide great tools for children to build socio-dramatic or social fantasy play (LaForett & Mendez, 2020). These settings and scenarios will require children to use planning and organization skills to decide on roles and rules, working memory to hold those ideas in their heads as they play, cognitive flexibility as original plans do not work, and the play develops, and inhibitory and emotional controls in their interactions with playmates.

Providing children the opportunity to explore these materials and play freely requires them to utilize self-regulatory skills, promoting the development of EF. Parents and teachers are responsible in their respective settings to promote child-directed, socio-dramatic, and social fantasy play. They are responsible for providing the tools necessary, the time for children to explore and play, and the playmates, including themselves as co-players. For teachers and parents, learning to participate in play without directing it requires additional training, be that in-service training for early childhood educators or lessons and readings on how to engage in play as a co-player as opposed to a leader for parents. To promote children's EF development through play, adults must defer to the child as the expert while providing materials, space, and time for the play to exist.

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## Designing an Effective Curriculum

Deb Lawrence, PhD

### Introduction:

Teacher-directed or pre-packaged curricula have created a mismatch between where children are developmentally in each domain, resulting in a classroom filled with unrealistic expectations. The curriculum may have little to no relationship to how children grow and develop or what children may be interested in investigating. Sadly, this approach to purchasing curricula costs a great deal of money. Though it promises to get children "ready," instead, it creates environments where exploration, initiative, discovery, and motivation are replaced by teacher instruction, arts and crafts, and too many transitions. Research suggests this harms children's development and well-being, a concern that needs attention (Gray, 2011).

The "readiness" approach to early learning began in the 1950s and has progressively become the driving force of education (Gray, 2011). Free play in neighborhoods, early childhood programs, and primary grades have decreased and been replaced by organized sports, after-school ancillary activities, dependence on technology, and even homework to be completed after a long school day. These adult-driven activities limit children's freedom to play and, according to Gray (2011), have led to an increase in childhood anxiety and depression and the rise in medication given to children whose bodies are not ready for this overly structured schedule. Compounding the move to readiness was the No Child Left Behind (NLCB) law of 2001.

The NCLB law focused on school accountability through increased standardized testing and financial penalties for schools that did not show annual progress (Kline, 2015). The goal of leaving no child behind resulted in more and more children being left behind. In their efforts to comply with the unrealistic expectations of the law, schools adopted a curriculum that promised results and limited child choice and play. Recess disappeared, and the focus on subject-specific or siloed instruction in reading and math to improve cognitive skills ignored the importance of integrated curriculum, cultural

responsiveness, individual children's developmental levels, and the prior experiences of children that they brought into the classroom.

This law did not increase the scores in low-income areas, nor did the structured canned curriculum purchased by the school districts meet promised expectations. It placed intense pressure on teachers to get children "ready." Parents and primary grade teachers put pressure on early childhood programs serving the birth-to-five population, resulting in a catastrophic mismatch in early childhood programs between what children are developmentally ready for and the unrealistic expectations placed on children, ignoring both theoretical perspectives on development (Masitoh & Mariono, 2022) and child development milestones. In some programs, this looks like flash cards used for letter recognition in toddler classrooms and increased use of technology in all age groups. Language and literacy development is focused primarily on the alphabet and phonics, and a rigid schedule that includes teacher-led activities limits the time for child-initiated free play.

It is time to reimagine the curriculum, reconsider what is essential in early childhood, and return to an inquiry-based, emergent, and integrated curriculum that honors the child's right to play and sees play as the primary approach to development. It is also time to acknowledge that child choice and play are necessary for human development.

### **The Intersection of Play and Curriculum**

If the children are the curriculum (Bev Bos, *Starting at Square One*, 1994), the teacher's role is to determine what children are interested in and then to plan experiences that deepen children's prior knowledge. Incorporating child-initiated play as the foundation of the curriculum allows the teacher to observe each child's development in each developmental domain, pick up on children's interests, and construct the curriculum to align with these interests. This approach ensures that the teacher creates a curriculum that scaffolds development versus implementing a curriculum that does not align with development (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.).

Several organizations and individuals have defined play. These definitions will be used to reach a consensus for this article. In 1989, the United Nations developed the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They identified childhood as the period of birth through 18 years. Article 31 of the Convention states

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the child's age, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational, and leisure activity (United Nations, 1989)

The International Play Association describes play, along with basic needs of nutrition, health, shelter, and education, as vital to developing children's potential. They go on to provide the characteristics of play as instinctive, voluntary, and spontaneous, giving satisfaction and feelings of achievement, leading to physical, mental, emotional, and social development, and being a means of learning to live (International Play Association, n.d.)

Peter Gray (2013, p. 140) defines play as "self-chosen, self-directed, intrinsically motivated, and guided by mental rules but still allowing room for creativity and imagination." Gray (2013) explains that play is conducted in an alert, active, and relatively non-stressed frame of mind. Stuart Brown agrees with Gray's (2013) definition. However, he adds that when an adult directs play or pursues an extrinsic motivator or reward, it is not play (National Institute for Play, n.d.). He says that "play appears to be purposeless, produces pleasure and joy, and leads one to the next stage of mastery," as quoted in Tippet, 2008.

Almon & Miller, 2009, state that play includes "activities that are freely chosen and directed by children and arise from intrinsic motivation." Rachel White (2012, p.3)

describes play as simple yet profound to a child's development that happens naturally and joyfully as a child explores and discovers the world's wonders. She emphasizes that the internal drive to play is present without adult direction. This internal drive is what development requires. White provides the necessary characteristics of play.

Play is pleasurable; children must enjoy the activity, or it is not play. Play is intrinsically motivated, and children engage in it simply for the satisfaction the behavior brings. It has no extrinsically motivated function or goal; Play is process-oriented. When children play, the means are not more important than the ends; Play is freely chosen. It is spontaneous and voluntary. If a child feels pressured, they will likely not consider the activity as play. Players must be physically and mentally involved in the activity; play is non-literal. It involves make-believe (White, 2012, p. 6).

In summary, play is self-chosen, spontaneous, physically active, filled with make-believe, internally driven, purposeless, includes long periods uninterrupted by adults, and involves curiosity, exploration, and discovery.

Now that we have defined play, identifying what play is not can help ensure that a child's right to play is present in their daily lives. Adults do not direct play. For example, in any setting, if the adult chooses what is available, with whom to play, and how long the play will last, it is not play. When children attend adult-directed out-of-school activities, such as recreational sports or activities, that is not play, nor is it play when adults structure recess.

Incorporating child-initiated play creates an opportunity to align the curriculum with children's interests, creating a classroom filled with wonder, where children feel empowered to explore and discover and where the curriculum is meaningful and relevant to the children's experiences.

The Opposite of Play is Not Work; It is Depression (Brian Sutton-Smith, 2001)].

## The Case for Play

The American Academy of Pediatrics describes play as essential to cognitive, language, physical, social, and emotional development (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012). Milteer and Ginsburg explain the benefits of child-initiated play, describing opportunities to use creativity, imagination, and physical, cognitive, social, and emotional strength, which are development's building blocks. These playful explorations allow children to explore the world while building their confidence and resiliency to help them prepare for future challenges. When adults direct play, children lose opportunities to problem-solve, negotiate, follow their interests, make decisions, and practice leadership skills.

Bruce Perry (2001) discussed how play contributes to children's understanding of the world around them. With the school readiness movement focused on academics, Perry reminds us that the fuel for development is rooted in a child's curiosity and active exploration of the environment. Children's curiosity leads them to discover the wonders around them. These discoveries increase a child's motivation to repeat their exploration, which leads to the pleasure of sharing their discoveries with others. These experiences increase their motivation, build their confidence, and boost their self-esteem. As this cycle repeats itself over and over, children's curiosity and motivation grow stronger. Perry cautions that the motivation to be curious can be negatively affected when opportunities for exploration and discovery are replaced with more focused and structured adult-led activities. These adult-led activities affect all developmental domains and impact emotional, social, and cognitive development. Perry cautions that adults can impact children's curiosity and exploration when children's daily experiences include fear, adult disapproval, or the absence of warm and nurturing relationships. Trauma, hunger, illness, abuse, and insecurity all impact a child's curiosity.

When reviewing how the brain creates connections, one way to recognize the benefits of play is to examine how neural pathways develop. Free play creates these neural connections that promote development across physical, social, emotional, and cognitive abilities. Free play wires the brain for the skills we will use throughout life

(National Institute for Play). These skills include "physical agility, social confidence, emotional regulation, creativity, and resilience" (National Institute for Play, n.d.).

Since the readiness movement began, there has been a shift in the daily routine away from child choice to all children moving through the day from one whole group activity to another large group activity with little choice or opportunity to discover and explore. This approach eliminates the joy of play. Furthermore, it ignores the need for teachers to observe children during play to authentically assess children's development across all domains, not just cognitive. Assessment has then moved away from the careful observation that leads to discovering children's interests and individual variations, identifying areas of development that are not within a typical range, and tailoring playful experiences that can scaffold development to more structured options. Finally, authentic assessment provides critical information that can lead the educator to recommend children for screening and early intervention. In contrast, less authentic assessments such as performance-based assessments and standardized testing have prescribed right or wrong answers and only measure what the child remembers, not how the child can apply the information.

In play, it is as though [the child] were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development (Vygotsky, 1967, p.16).

### **Designing Curriculum Through the Lens of Inquiry, Emergent, and Integrated Approaches**

Moving away from a canned or in-the-box curriculum is needed. Several tried and proven approaches are available. Investigating these approaches helps us reimagine a classroom where children's interests and development drive the curriculum.

An inquiry-based curriculum is "an array of classroom practices that promote development through guided and, increasingly, independent investigation of complex questions and problems, often for which there is no single answer" (Lee et al., 2004, p. 9). A simple way to do this in any classroom is to ask a question related to something you have heard children question or something related to a topic, subject, or concept



you have planned. Incorporating an inquiry-based approach allows the teacher to determine what children already **know** about the topic, ask them **what** more they are interested in learning, and, as the inquiry progresses, ask them what they **learned**. This KWL approach also effectively documents children's interests and the new knowledge they have acquired. Repeating this technique at the end of the topic can lead to other areas of inquiry, continuing the cycle of deepening children's learning.

Emergent curriculum subscribes to the belief that children are most successful at learning when curriculum experiences account for their interests, strengths, needs, and lived realities (Toronto, n.d.). Emergent curriculum development includes adults and children taking the initiative and making decisions. This power to impact curriculum decisions and directions means that curriculum is a negotiation between the children's interests and how adults can use these interests to scaffold children's development. Ideas for curriculum emerge from responding to interests and questions.

An integrated or interdisciplinary curriculum allows children to pursue learning holistically without the restrictions imposed by siloed subject boundaries. An integrated curriculum creates opportunities to engage children in experiences by combining skills, attitudes, content areas, and developmental domains to make meaningful connections that allow them to apply these connections to their prior knowledge and daily experiences (Akib, E., 2020). Early childhood programs' emphasis on developing curriculum should correspond with the inter-relatedness and interdependence of development. Unfortunately, the "readiness" movement has emphasized the cognitive domain. Focusing on one developmental domain ignores a fundamental child development principle. All cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and language domains do not develop or operate in isolation. Each enables and mutually supports learning and development in the others (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015).

When adults or communities expect young children to master skills for which the necessary brain circuits have not yet been formed, they waste time and resources and may even impair healthy brain development by inducing excessive stress in the child (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).

The integrated curriculum approach incorporates multiple domains and subject areas in each play experience. Here is an example of an integrated play experience. The teacher has planned a guided small group play experience as a choice in the morning free play time. The guided experience involves sorting objects into categories, for example, size, shape, or color. This play experience would include math, fine motor, language, and social skills since it takes place in a small group. The teacher could align this play experience with state early learning standards, gather data through observation, photos, work samples, or other authentic methods, and use the information for authentic assessment instruments such as High Scope COR, Teaching Strategies Gold, and the Work Sampling System. Integrated experiences provide children with active learning.

An integrated curriculum also incorporates investigative processes, problem-solving, and critical thinking. It emphasizes the importance of knowing child development principles and how this information can create a community of eager and engaged learners in a culturally responsive classroom. Integrated teaching and learning processes enable children to acquire and use basic skills across content areas and to develop motivation for continued learning throughout the school years (Education, 2017).

These curriculum approaches may seem separate, but they create a dynamic, relevant, meaningful, culturally responsive, engaging, and motivating classroom. Children are inspired to investigate, explore, and discover. Combining these approaches enhances 21st-century learning skills such as initiative, collaboration, creativity, self-direction, problem-solving, and critical thinking (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). When using one or more of these approaches while developing a curriculum, you create an environment that addresses the whole child, not just the cognitive domain. If the curriculum is the child (Holmes, *Starting at Square One*, 1994). Then, each child's development, what is needed to scaffold development, and how you assess them must be addressed.

Using inquiry, emergent, or integrated approaches to curriculum intentionally moves away from a weekly or monthly theme-based approach, often centered around

seasons or celebrations of traditional holidays that are not culturally responsive. It eliminates an annual theme cycle that is repeated year after year with similar activities and learning objectives. Including integrated, inquiry, and emergent curriculum elements allows for deeper investigations to answer questions that arise and build on children's prior knowledge, continuing to expand their curiosity and love of learning. As you arrive at a topic, adding topic-related materials throughout the classroom provides opportunities for extending and integrating the curriculum throughout the room. Embedding topic-related materials, including loose parts and other nature-related items, makes the curriculum come alive in the books you read, the items you place in the dramatic play area, the materials you select for the sensory table, the items you place in science, the accessories you incorporate into blocks, art, music, and manipulatives. Assessment includes collecting work samples, language samples, photos, observations, or re-enacting stories or scenarios related to the curriculum.

### **Conclusion: Redesigning Curriculum**

The children in your classroom are the most essential factor in selecting the curriculum. The curriculum must be based on what is meaningful and relevant to children's daily or weekly experiences and deepen children's learning about their community. For example, every child is living in a family of some type. Many children may have pets in the household, but many enjoy nature and what lives in nature. Depending on the season of the year, going beyond fall, spring, summer, and winter, which are repetitive themes in programs, brainstorm how to build on children's prior learning and expand their discovery of what is taking place beyond the seasonal changes. For Fall and Winter, consider hibernation or nocturnal/diurnal animals as an example. Children often use some types of transportation and extend their prior knowledge by exploring other types. Children live in a community; instead of typical community helpers, they investigate other community helpers. These are just a couple of examples of where to start. I have found a concept map of putting a central idea in the center, branching out to sub-topics, avoiding siloing by subject, and then branching out again can provide a road map for curriculum development.

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## **The Negative Impacts of Standardized Testing: Why Authentic Assessment and Play Offer Solutions**

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### **Problem Statement – Issues**

Over the past century, standardized testing has become a pervasive, dominating force in the global educational context. In the American system, standardized tests have profoundly influenced children and adolescents and have greatly impacted how our youth become educated (Heissel et al., 2021; Lai, 2022). The insidious structures, purposes, and practices of testing have deep roots that have penetrated every aspect of the teaching, learning, and assessment process in schools (Cunningham, 2018). Because educators are so entrenched in these practices, generations of children have been negatively impacted with little relief in sight.

If standardized testing was worth the incredible priority that it has been given under federal law, by states, and by school districts, then the outcomes and consequences of the practice could perhaps be justified. However, standardized tests do not serve as a valuable or accurate form of measurement for general intelligence, nor do they measure other valuable skills like creativity (National Education Association, 2023; Shafiyeva, 2021; Sternberg, 2015). Test scores are significantly influenced by socio-economic status (i.e., students in wealthy areas score well), and they negatively and disproportionately impact students of color (Bradley, 2022; Cabral-Gouveia et al., 2023). Despite these factors, standardized testing remains a constant force in American schools.

Even though the practice offers an efficient means of “assessing” the masses, the traditions, culture, and testing practices have sweeping negative consequences that have reduced the field of education to a game with very real winners and losers. The winners include the testing companies that profit from publishing and scoring standardized exams required by the federal government (Miner, 2004; Public Broadcasting Service, 2002). K-12 standardized testing is a multi-billion-dollar industry with a 2022 value of 11.5 billion (USD) and a predicted value of 21.6 billion (USD) by 2030 (SNS, 2023). The losers in this game are the schools, teachers, students, and the

overall quality of education (Au, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2015; FairTest, n.d.; Kohn, 2001; Spann, 2015). Children are particularly vulnerable and suffer losses in creativity, divergent thinking, capacities for play, and authentic learning (Abeles, 2015; Armstrong, 2013; Hagopian, 2014; Terada, 2022). Furthermore, when overly tested, children suffer from poor self-confidence, low motivation, test anxiety, and a whole host of other physical, emotional, and mental effects that diminish their humanity and capacity for future success in diverse arenas.

Therefore, due to the lack of quality assessment value, the dehumanizing nature of testing, and the immense toll that testing takes on our most vulnerable populations, the practice needs to be disposed of, and a critical reexamination of our system needs to be undertaken with radical reform as the end goal. All children should be able to find success and deserve an equitable educational experience that is meaningful, relevant, interesting, and intrinsically motivating. Authentic assessments and a more creative, playful learning environment can aid children in finding that success, but standardized tests (as they currently exist) should have no place in a healthy educational system.

## **Background**

In the late 1830s, the concept of assessing student achievement through standardized measures gained steam. At that time, American educators began articulating the perceived need for formal assessments to measure student knowledge and progress (NEA, 2020). For nearly two centuries, standardized testing evolved and eventually became a dominating force in the American educational landscape. Over the past century, educators have become entrenched in the widespread use and culture of standardized tests, and more recently, they have endured decades of federally mandated, state-implemented testing in public education.

Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the federal law signed by President George W. Bush in 2002, which was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, American students spent an average of 20-25 hours a year taking tests and took an average of 112 standardized tests between kindergarten and 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Kerr & Lederman, 2015; Klein, 2015). Children and adolescents who spent around 300 hours taking tests between the ages of 5 and 18 saw their school

experience pervaded by bubble sheets and a culture of testing that saw nearly all their teachers' efforts specifically geared towards increasing achievement scores. Under federal law and the state implementation of standardized testing, the curriculum significantly narrowed, the academic pressures increased dramatically, creativity and play saw drastic declines, and the educative process became a vapid, homogenizing machine that stole the joy and wonder from children.

Furthermore, under NCLB, students, teachers, schools, districts, and states were beset with high-stakes accountability measures that called for important decisions to be tied to test scores. Consequences were attached to student underperformance, assuming that the pressure created by a high-stakes environment would increase student achievement (Nichols et al., 2005). The consequences of underperformance impact multiple levels, including individual students, teachers, schools, districts, and even states. Individual students receiving poor scores faced the following adverse possibilities:

- Grade retention (Losen, 2005)
- Remediation efforts that often came with labeling and stigmatization (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002)
- Referrals for special education services, sometimes unnecessarily (Yell et al., 2006)
- A loss of electives in high school (Reardon, 2011)
- A delay or inability to graduate high school (Neild & Balfanz, 2006)
- Negative labeling that came from poor scores (Weinstein, 2002)

Teachers also faced many possible consequences that were often related to factors outside their control. Their students' underperformance on standardized tests was often highly correlated with socioeconomic status, which is commonly referred to as the achievement gap or opportunity gap (Bradley, 2022; Cabral-Gouveia et al., 2023). Negative consequences for teachers included:

- Loss of job security, including firings, non-renewals, and even losing licensure (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2007)
- Professional stigmatization (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006)
- Increased stress, burnout, and turnover (Johnson et al., 2012)



- Limited professional development opportunities (Ingersoll, 2001)
- Severely diminished autonomy and academic freedom (Darling-Hammond, 2006)
- Highly skewed/inequitable evaluation practices (Ritter et al., 2009)

For schools, the high costs for underperformance included:

- Loss of federal funding or financial penalties (Carter & Welner, 2013)
- Sanctions with escalating consequences (Cucchiara, 2013)
- Negative public perceptions (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006)
- Teacher and staff replacement (Hanushek et al., 2004)
- A narrowing of the curriculum (Au, 2011; Nichols & Berliner, 2007)
- Increased stress and burnout for administrators (Johnson et al., 2012)
- A negative impact on student well-being (Pope, 2009)
- Significant impact on marginalized populations (Losen & Orfield, 2002)

Many of the negative consequences of standardized testing were known even around the time of the passing of NCLB. A significant report released in 2005 (just three years after the implementation of NCLB) from the Education Policy Studies Laboratory out of Arizona State University suggested in its executive summary that “there [was] no convincing evidence that the pressure associated with high-stakes testing [led] to any important benefits for students’ achievement” (Nichols et al., 2005, p. iii). In fact, the report outlined a number of negative consequences correlating with the high-stakes pressure of testing, including an increased likelihood that students would drop out and a disproportionately negative impact on students of color (Nichols et al., 2005).

Furthermore, evidence for standardized testing being an inaccurate/unfair measure of student knowledge and intelligence was also building during the early 2000s to 2010s (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kohn, 2000; Popham, 2001).

Under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, again a reauthorization of the ESEA, students were supposed to receive a reduced testing schedule in K-12 public schools with a decoupling of the high-stakes component that defined NCLB’s testing regime (NEA, 2020). The language of ESSA called for more state flexibility, reduced federal oversight, multiple measures of assessment, limited high-stakes testing, and an emphasis on the quality rather than the quantity of assessments (Adams et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). While there has been some improvement under ESSA,

our education culture has been so ingrained in testing practices that in the actual implementation, not much has changed (FairTest, 2018; Gewertz, 2018; Saultz et al., 2019).

Finally, standardized testing and its wider impact on education have had a significantly adverse effect on children's play. Under the false assumptions that children needed more (and more rigorous) academic time, multiple generations of children have experienced the following negative consequences that have directly impacted play:

- Reduction or elimination of recess and physical activity (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005)
- Narrowing the curriculum with a lack of value for play and creativity (Ravitch, 2024)
- Increased academic pressure, including homework (Pope, 2003)
- Emphasis on Direct Instruction (Pellegrini, 2009)
- Stress and Anxiety (Gray, 2011)
- Diminished creativity and imagination (Johnson et al., 2005)

Under NCLB and ESSA, many schools reduced or eliminated recess in favor of increased instructional time and test preparation. Furthermore, the overemphasis on language arts and mathematics led to a significant decline in art, music, and physical education. Classroom instruction became less flexible and more rigid, with prescribed curriculum programs and an expectation for compliance. Instructional practices continued to shift towards Direct Instruction, which saw less overall activity, passive learning, and superficial memorizations of the content that was to be regurgitated on the test. The high-stakes pressures of the system created a vacuum of joy and wonder in schools, and the creativity and imagination of children suffered. Play, both at school and at home, has also suffered immensely.

### **Appropriate Approaches/Strategies**

Authentic assessment has long been a meaningful alternative to testing. These types of assessments are performance-based, requiring students to demonstrate their knowledge or apply their skills through relevant, real-world activities. People learn by doing, and the abilities and understandings of the child can be deeply assessed through

their physical and mental activity. For example, if someone wanted to learn how to ride a horse, a teacher would demonstrate that process through real-world activity (i.e., modeling how to ride a horse) while embedding relevant concepts and terminology. Once the students have processed that initial information, they could get on the horse and put into practice what they have learned. The authentic assessment would involve the teacher observing and noting the person's knowledge and skills while they are riding, and the teacher would provide meaningful feedback in real-time. This process can be done in all school subjects and provide the teacher with meaningful information with which they can plan new instruction, modify instruction, or stay with a topic for as long as a child needs. Authentic assessment also allows the teacher to individualize the assessments and plan instruction that better fits individual children rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach.

Authentic assessments often provide a deeper, more accurate, and valid measure than traditional tests while also promoting a higher level of cognitive activity (Indiana University Bloomington, 2024). Furthermore, they are likelier to foster student interest and motivation, involve valuable problem-solving skills, and capitalize on a student's creativity (Indiana University Bloomington, 2024). These assessments tend to be descriptive or narrative rather than quantifiable because genuine learning is a process that is much more complex and interrelated than what can be easily scored (Eisner, 1979; Erickson, 2007). For example, it is perhaps easy for a child to recall (for a short time) a memorized fact like, "The Emancipation Proclamation was issued on January 1, 1863." In this hypothetical traditional testing scenario, the student could memorize that date, select the correct answer on a multiple-choice exam, and get one point for selecting the correct answer. However, despite the child being able to select the correct date, that does not mean they understand or can explain the historical context of the document, including its rationale, impact, and significance. These deeper understandings are not easily quantifiable, but they are qualifiable. Therefore, tests often measure what is easily recalled; they promote superficial memorizations that may not be retained long and skew the entire educative process towards an artificial goal (acceptable score) that may or may not involve any real learning. Authentic assessments represent a viable, healthy alternative to traditional testing, are valid and

reliable, and “have been found to produce superior educational and equitable outcomes to standardized tests” (FairTest, 2023, p. 6).

Finally, one meaningful pathway for conducting authentic assessments is play. As previously noted, standardized testing has a significantly negative impact on children’s play. Play is often abandoned because it is viewed as frivolous, and it is replaced with testing preparation. Robinson (2015) suggests, “The exile of play is one of the great tragedies of standardized education” (p. 94). In addition, the decline in children’s freedom to engage in play during school is contrasted with an increase in children’s anxieties and mental disorders (Gray, 2014). Robinson (2015) also understands how play is “fundamental to learning” (p. 96). Gray (2013) agrees and adds that play is the way “children practice and acquire the physical and intellectual skills that are essential for success in the culture in which they are growing” (p. 5). Thus, authentic assessment during play is essential to capture children’s authentic understandings.

Importantly, play-based assessments represent an opportunity for educators to gain deep, valuable insights into children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development through their unique play worlds (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2004). As children play with different materials, imagine, invent, socialize, and use varied vocabulary through self-chosen play, a plethora of information can be conveyed, including their conceptual understandings, skills, problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, and the ability to collaborate. This wealth of information can be highly useful for educators to understand their students and to develop instructional experiences that are a strong fit for the child. However, educators need to be aware of the importance of play and authentic assessment. This does not mean that play should be used as a tool where the teacher dictates the play to achieve some educational objective. It just means that a child’s freely chosen play can be a valuable source of information.

## **Conclusion/Recommendations**

Standardized testing is ubiquitous and deeply ingrained in the culture of education today. However, this particular assessment practice, which was designed to measure knowledge and skills on a massive scale, is wholly inappropriate for modern schools. Standardized tests are not particularly accurate and come with a whole host of

problematic issues that can be detrimental to children, teachers, and schools. The proponents of standardized testing have less and less ground on which to stand, and the opponents are becoming louder and more confident. The research is becoming clearer, and when the dust settles, there is really only one path to take. Ditch standardized tests and embrace authentic assessment tools, including play-based assessments.

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## The Danger of Push Down Curriculum

Peter Dargatz

**Have you ever burnt your dinner? *Timing is everything.***

**Have you ever seen a toddler touch a hot stove? *Experience is essential.***

**Have you ever seen someone who can't swim jump into the deep end?**

### ***Readiness***

In the real world, not paying attention to timing, experience, and readiness can have negative consequences. In the classroom, these consequences can be downright dire. While the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 ravaged many aspects of our everyday lives, it dramatically impacted the education system. But let's not blame the pandemic for all the problems in today's education system. Issues with the way we instruct our future generations preceded any pandemic. The increased emphasis on higher academic standards in Early Childhood Education has changed the instructional landscape and developed myths of quality learning. In recent decades, pre- and primary schools have begun to focus more on assessments and testing as a determinant of quality learning; this emphasis has led to a shift to "push down academics," which refers to an increase of academic standards at a younger age (Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, 2016). Test scores and data points have become increasingly important contributors to society's perceived notion that we must do more and more academically sooner and sooner. The evolution of education emphasizes student performance based on the results of mandated, standardized assessments rather than overall comprehension of an already rigorous curriculum. These scores help drive classroom, grade, school, and district decision-making. Schools aim to have the highest scores on these assessments and associated school report cards to seek support and favor from their community and state, essentially using these successes to obtain funding. Funding can be lessened and withheld if schools aren't successful or at least showing significant progress toward success.

Sounds reasonable, right? To the untrained eye, this sounds like a great business model for success. But there's one glaring issue. School is not a business. Students are not little businessmen and businesswomen aiming to reach the top of the corporate ladder. These scores don't take into account so many factors that are pivotal to student success. Instead, they use a standard, assembly-line approach to answering, regardless of any connected comprehension.

Decisionmakers who require these assessments and celebrate these report cards also didn't consider the competition crisis. While businesses live and die with their profit margin, schools aren't built to be moneymakers. They are, however, built to build up the next generation. This comes with a price. Educating the next generation is a huge responsibility. The pressure to live up to this responsibility is overwhelming at times. With financial and community support on the line, these scores (often the easiest and most directly communicated indicator of how a school is going) have taken on an utterly staggering amount of importance. Teaching to the test is real, even if it is not ideal for a student's understanding of content. Schools don't want to "fail" in the eyes of their stakeholders, even if they are at a competitive disadvantage in a world where equity is anything but equitable. Long story short, something that is certainly not best for kids has become exactly what schools are held accountable for and rated on. It's not kids first anymore. It's scores first. Simultaneously, while test scores meant more, the sheer number of required assessments increased and expanded into classrooms of younger and younger learners. With test preparation and an influx of higher-level academic rigor for our earliest learners, schools shifted their schedules, expectations, and how they interacted with their students. And this started long before the 2020 pandemic.

While history won't look back at the pandemic with great excitement, this experience did impact school perception in a way that will hopefully move education back into a student-centered focus. With schools closed and education suffering, people started to understand and value educators and schools' role in molding and preparing children for the future. What they didn't understand was what to do when schools reopened. While educators saw this as an opportunity to re-evaluate what our school systems could improve to support our students, their families, and the overall

educational system, those decision-makers saw it differently. It was a race, and we were losing.

Many felt the time away from face-to-face instruction damaged student learning. While the damage wasn't irreparable, drastic measures needed to be taken so that these students could "catch up." With this goal in mind, even more was expected of learners when the doors of the schools reopened. But catching up should not have been the goal. If the pandemic taught us anything, it should have taught us the importance of slowing down. In fact, slowing down would be the most responsible route to catching up.

Pushing down academics does little but push down pressure. While present before the pandemic, pushdown academics seem to have sped up post-pandemic. The pressure to catch up because of the time away from the classroom and the perceived importance of improving test scores and report card information only exacerbates this issue. Children are expected to do more than ever at a time when they are entering school with fewer skills than ever before. While the impacts of the pandemic certainly contribute to this skill deficiency, other factors are in play. In short, societal factors have minimized the amount of play children are exposed to even before their school experience begins. For example, overscheduling, risk aversion, and how play is perceived and experienced have changed. Children's preschool and early childhood educational experiences tend to be much more academic-focused. Because of pushdown academics, students lack the experiences to grow in the key areas necessary for more independent academic readiness while simultaneously being expected to do more. This is not a recipe for success.

Expecting children to understand more and more at an earlier age is not feasible. Child development has not changed, so it isn't logical to expect children to suddenly develop new academic materials simply because they were presented to them earlier. If they're not ready, they're not ready no matter how often they see or hear new information.

Pushdown academics is leading to increases, though. Some children learn new material and successfully display that knowledge earlier than ever before. However, these positive results pale in comparison to the added frustration, anxiety, and pressure loaded on children, families, and school personnel. Children who were once developing

at an appropriate and expected rate are now considered in need of intervention and "slow." Detrimental impacts on the attitudes children have towards learning and school, in general, are tied closely to their lack of success with pushdown academics and the pressure to perform. Continuing to push down academics before children are ready undermines our ability to let kids be kids and perform to their potential. Education is not a race we can win.

So, how do we reverse the trend and build strong, independent learners with a thirst for growth and an excitement to excel? No matter what we do, we must remember that readiness, experience, and timing must be at the core of our decision-making. Teaching children where they are is much more important than getting them where they need to be. Let's avoid wrapping children around a set curriculum and instead use it to fit learners at their pace, interest level, and ability. Let's slow down to catch up.

**Let's play.**

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## Executive Function: An Early Key to Successful Outcomes

Dr. Sharon Rodgers Jackson

### **Problem Statement:**

How can adults provide support and encouragement as children acquire and use executive function skills? This question is predicated on the belief that these skills are essential and should be a part of the learning process of young children.

The implementation of executive functions begins early in the developmental trajectory. These skills develop through intentional and consistent interactions between adult and child, child and child, and the child and environment (Blair, 2016; Richland & Burchinal, 2013). Quality skill-building opportunities are essential to the adult role as the more competent other, as noted by Vygotsky (Morrison et al., 2021).

### **Issues:**

Executive function development is an ongoing process that begins well before a child attends any group setting or public school. How adults support or inhibit this development is a concern and can pose challenges as children mature. It is critical to be grounded in child development milestones to avoid inhibiting executive function development.

Information on child development milestones is readily available. These developmental milestones have been researched extensively and are widely available (Centers for Disease Control, 2024). Unfortunately, developmental milestones are not used in many settings when determining effective strategies for developing executive functioning and reacting to a child's actions or behavior. When this occurs, the child may be confused, overwhelmed, or punished for something they do not understand or are not yet developmentally able to accomplish. This paper highlights the areas that should be considered when supporting a child's development of executive functioning.

#### *- Developmental differences*

Developmental milestones provide a continuum of physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional development. They are a general development guide by age and are sensitive to each child's experiences, genetics, culture, and environment (Center for the Developing Child, 2024).



- *Adult and environmental influences*

Children are typically cared for by various adults—parents, family members, regular or temporary caregivers, early education providers—and each may be in a different setting or environment. As stated, the environment plays a vital role in early learning, as does language, parenting, and teaching style. These differences can create confusion for the child if they have various reactions to the adults in each situation (Jackson, 2024).

- *Cultural differences*

Attitudes and ideas about children, child-rearing, and education are a part of any culture and heritage. Practices within a family's belief system may impact the development or expression of executive function skills. Communicating and cooperating with families is an essential sign of respect for their culture while supporting the child's growth (Jackson, 2024).

Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have fewer resources and less access to experiences, contributing to their foundational learning and executive function development (Blair, 2016; Neville et al., 2013). Additionally, these children may also experience more stress or traumatic events. Teachers or caregivers should be aware of the family situation so they can work to support families' access to community resources and collaborate to support practices that foster executive functioning that are consistent between home and school (Jackson, 2024).

## **Background**

Executive function refers to mental skills that help children control their thoughts, actions, and emotions. The list of tasks that comprise executive function has many elements, with some going by more than one title. For instance, the ability to stop doing something harmful or stop when asked is inhibitory control or impulse control; cognitive flexibility may also be mental flexibility (Center for the Developing Child, n.d.; Diamond, 2007).

A lack of executive function can be interpreted as poor behavior or intentional actions (Jackson, 2024). Children who lack executive functioning skills can be easily

overwhelmed, leading to tantrums, yelling, and acting out aggressively. Children who lack executive functioning skills need a warm and responsive caregiver who can model different ways to communicate needs or respond to frustrating situations. The caregiver's responsibility is to be calm and empathetic, validating how the child is feeling and recognizing the need to wait with the child until they are calmer and able to internalize other ways to handle a frustrating situation (Fuhs et al., 2014; Jackson, 2024).

The Center for the Developing Child (Harvard University) offers resources, strategies, and support for adults who work with or have young children. Resources address the three primary executive function skills: working memory, mental (or cognitive) flexibility, and inhibitory (or self) control (Center for the Developing Child, n.d.). *Working memory* is remembering important things to successfully complete a task, assignment, or action (Center for the Developing Child, n.d.).

"I know how to work the puzzle by taking out each piece and placing it in the container on my left. Then, I can put the pieces where they go. When I finish the puzzle, I will put it back on the shelf so someone else can have a turn"  
(Jackson, 2024).

*Mental flexibility* is the understanding that things can change based on where and what we do. It is also the ability to transition easily from one activity to another when there are different expectations (Center for the Developing Child, n.d.).

"I know I can yell when playing outside, but when we come into the building and return to my classroom, I only need to use my voice at a level my friend can hear me" (Jackson, 2024).

"We are going to circle time, where I will sit quietly and listen to the story. After the story, we will sing and dance, and I can participate with my friends"  
(Jackson, 2024).

*Inhibitory or self-control* is the ability to restrict movements when required and to hold back when feelings may threaten to overcome our actions (Center for the Developing Child, n.d.).

"When we walk to the cafeteria, I keep my hands to myself and do not touch

the posters and art on the wall” (Jackson, 2024).

“I really wanted that blue truck, and now Jeff has taken it. I want to grab it from him, but I will ask if I can play with it next” (Jackson, 2024).

## **Approaches**

A multitude of methods are possible to introduce and encourage executive function for children (Diamond, 2007). With very young children (under age three), there will naturally be more modeling and role-playing as language develops. Children are becoming more accustomed to independence and expectations (Fuhs et al., 2014). More conversation, reasoning, and direction can occur as children mature and become more capable and interested in the world and the people around them. Seven methods to provide scaffolding for executive function development include (Jackson, 2024):

- *Direct Instruction*: Age level determines the best direct instruction type (Jackson, 2024). With younger children, the language and gestures will be slow and deliberate as they see a skill demonstrated or begin to use it themselves. Older children can rely on reminders, such as a rebus or word poster outlining the steps to solve the issue.
- *Modeling*: Illustrating with actions and descriptive language and including the possibility of more than one experience is helpful as adults share information with children (Jackson, 2024). Explaining how to use a process and allowing time and space to practice the process creates a success-oriented event for the learners.
- *Explicit Teaching*: Some things must be explicitly taught to the group (Jackson, 2024). An example of this could be in the art center. Using a rebus or word chart, describe each step for painting at the easel. Walk a small group through each step and explain the reasoning for the step. Allow questions and offer practice opportunities. Peer mentoring can also be involved in this strategy.
- *Routines & Schedules*: Consistency of the sequence of activities is far more critical than the actual time of specific transitions (Jackson, 2024). Children love routine and learn best in a stable and reliable situation. A daily picture schedule at eye

level with recognizable visuals that communicate what comes next and photos of the children in the classroom is helpful. The schedule must be flexible so that special events, semi-regular activities (such as fire drills), and guests can be included, and children are prepared for the change.

- *Integration into Daily Activities*: Executive function tasks are not stand-alone or one-time-only events. They should be a part of daily life in the classroom and use authentic classroom events to help children resolve issues appropriately (Jackson, 2024). "Everybody got their lunch boxes in the right place this morning...you used your working memory!" (Jackson, 2024).
- *Storytelling & Books*: Find books about executive skill development or be creative with stories you already know. These resources can be used to demonstrate how executive function skills are applied in stories (Jackson, 2024). Librarians and online resources can assist by supplying lists of books that meet your desired criteria.
- *Self-Reflection & Feedback*: An opportunity to review and examine how things worked (Jackson, 2024). Reflection can also be a guided discussion, especially with older children. Think about how a specific activity went or how an executive function task was embedded in an activity. Take notes and watch for growth in children.

## **Strategies**

Executive functions with appropriate strategies are listed below. Strategies may be used for a range of ages. Activities should be carefully reviewed to ensure they align with the age and ability of each child. Ensure expectations are age-appropriate and children can understand directions or steps. Most activities can be scaffolded for individual children. Some require materials and brief preparation; others can be "spur of the moment" and valuable for transition or unexpected wait times.

### - *Working Memory*

- **Treasure Hunt**: This game can be as simple or complex as your participants. For younger children, place numbers around the

area—inside or outside. Provide each child with a small clipboard with a list of numbers. Using a small pencil tied to the clipboard. Children can mark each one off as they find it. The list will support them in knowing what number comes next. For older children, use clues, rhymes, or descriptions to lead them from one point to another until they discover the "treasure" (Jackson, 2024).

- Memory Game: Any materials on hand can be used. Younger children use actual items (five or fewer) and take one away while their eyes are closed. Use a card deck, Uno cards, or an actual Memory Game for older children. Start with fewer cards (up to 16 in a 4 x 4 arrangement) and work up to more as they are successful (Jackson, 2024).
- Story Sequencing: This activity can be done with or without props. Read a book or tell a story, use nursery rhymes or American folk songs—all these are stories! After the first reading or song, start with the three basic questions—first, middle, or last, or for younger children, what happened next? As the children mature and gain experience, add more questions about details (Jackson, 2024).

#### - *Cognitive Flexibility*

- Sorting Challenge: Anything within the classroom can be used for this activity...including the children. The participants can determine how to sort the items if they can; the adult may be required to start the sorting process. Use manipulatives, blocks, books, art materials, or nature items, remembering that anything can be sorted. After the first effort, choose a different way to sort the same items (Jackson, 2024). Did the groups come out with similar numbers?
- Role-playing: Taking the perspective of another individual or character is an essential social learning skill and executive function support (Jackson, 2024). A familiar character, some backstory, or suggested characteristics might be helpful for younger children. For older children, the opportunity to create a character or reveal

differences in their design can be intriguing.

- Shape Patterns: Similar to shape sorting but done from the opposite perspective, this activity involves building instead of dissecting (Jackson, 2024). Allow children to determine how the pattern should be established and how many patterns they will repeat. Younger children may start with a simple AB pattern, while those with more skill may choose a more complicated version.

#### *- Impulse Control*

- Freeze Dance: Any song or music that can be stopped and then started can be used for Freeze Dance (Jackson, 2024). Introduce and acclimate the children to the rules of the activity. A couple of practice experiences are helpful for younger children, while older ones love the challenge of stopping in the middle of a crazy antic. There are Freeze Dance songs available commercially to add variety. Cultural songs from the cultures of the children in the class would be ways
- Red Light, Green Light: This classic children's game and Mother, May I? are great ways to revisit some favorites (Jackson, 2024). Ensuring the rules are understood, and some practices incorporated will provide a successful experience.
- Taking Turns Games: Games outside with balls, board games inside, and center-based materials that are limited (such as an art easel or a computer) can all teach the "wait your turn" idea (Jackson, 2024). Indeed, even snacks, water fountains, and bathroom access can be a part of this learning. Determining if a sign-up list would be helpful can be left to the children. A thorough discussion of the etiquette of turn-taking will be needed.

### **Conclusions/Recommendations**

The idea of "developing executive function skills" can sound a bit academic and perhaps even intimidating. Yet, the actual use of the tasks and the instruction involved

with children can be enjoyable and informative (Diamond, 2007). Knowing the children well in a classroom, care setting, or home is essential to create optimal opportunities. Ensuring that the adult is ready for the challenge of the activities and experiences is also critical for success. Many resources are available for adults to use for their learning or to discover new ideas to use with children. A recently published book, *Organized and Engaged*, by Julie Tourigny, provides support for learning strategies, activities, and play-based ideas to support children's success in developing executive functioning.

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## A Day in The Life at Barron Park Playschool

by Kim Adams

Today We Play - Barron Park Playschool

### **From Bikes to Books: A Morning of Exploration**

On a cool spring morning in the Barron Park neighborhood of Palo Alto, California, 4-year-old Tom pedals quickly on her two-wheeler bike to keep up with her dad and older sister. Tom's backpack is filled with her lunch, her favorite water bottle (the one with the yellow lid), and at least one change of clothes. Tom is on her way to Barron Park Playschool. A space created and curated for children 2-5 years old to play, explore, and connect (with people and ideas). This is Tom's story and a day in her life at Barron Park Playschool.

Tom is greeted at the gate by fragrant purple wisteria and a warm hello from her teacher. "I'm so glad you are here! I've been waiting for you." Tom carries her backpack into the outdoor classroom, hangs it on her hook, and quickly washes her hands. She is ready to start her day. Tom sits with her dad and sister in the outdoor library nook, a comfy corner tucked in under the big fig tree. They take time to read a book before they head off to drop big sister at the local elementary school. Goodbye happens amidst the books in what is arguably one of Tom's favorite locations in our space. After taking her time to look through books on her own or listen to more stories read by her teacher, Tom ventures out to explore the play invitations that the teacher has set out. The quiet early morning arrival lends itself to independent play as she awaits her friends to join the day.

This morning, the teachers set up peanut shelling with rubber mallets, a small world invitation in the round water tray, and the sensory bin filled with wet baking soda. Tom knows these activities will be available to her throughout the day, week, or month (as long as there is interest, there will be supplies). Tom chooses to spend several minutes at the easel painting rainbows in the shape of hearts- her latest creative obsession.

## **Forts, Friends, and Fun: Dramatic Play Takes Center Stage**

As more friends arrive, Tom enthusiastically greets them with an invitation of her own. "Ari, Florence, let's build a fort!" Large sheets of cardboard (boxes cut up the side with the top and bottom flaps removed) are quickly arranged in various dwelling shapes. The builders are quite adept at the work, as these structures have been a big part of the morning play for several months. Fabric and clips, sticks, and tape are brought to the fort making fun, resulting in covered maze-like creations that will be the setting for whichever dramatic play scenario unfolds.

Today, Tom and her friends are a family of cats. They negotiate who will be the mom cat, and who will be the kittens. The "cats" climb in and out of the forts, up into the fig tree, and all the way over to the sand yard, meowing and hissing as they interact with each other and anyone else in their path. Once in the sand yard, shaving cream, and colored water catch her attention, and the mixing of foam and colors ensues. Tom seems to be looking for a "just right" consistency and color, adding drops of colored water to her bowls. By the time she is done, she has seven bowls full of foamy water in varying shades of purple. "Kimmy, I mixed this with red and this one with a little yellow," she says to me as she points to her work. "What is your plan now, Tom?" I ask. She replies, "Nothing," as she wanders off to join her friends, grinding sidewalk chalk with small screens and catching the fine-colored dust in tiny paper cups. "We are making face paint! Do you want some?" A friend asks Tom. "Yes, I'm a kitty," says Tom as she dips her finger into the wet chalk and smears it on her nose and above her eyebrows in triangle cat-ear shapes. "Do you want some too, Billie? Do you want to be a cat?" Tom asks one of the younger kids. Billie (2 years old) says yes, and Tom repeats the chalk "face paint" pattern on her little friend. "Meow!" says Billie, running away.

Snack is brought into the yard and placed on a table in the shade. Today, fresh watermelon wedges and Cheerios are offered. Tom and her friends know that snacks will be available for a while, so there is no rush to clean up and join. Eventually, however, Tom's emerging interoceptive sense alerts her that she is, in fact, hungry. Tom washes her hands, selects two big wedges of watermelon, and pours a scoop of crunchy Cheerios into her cardboard snack tray. Tom carries her snack to the round table and sits next to Adina, Collin, and Fred. The four friends eat, laugh, and play the

"animal guessing game " (a riff on 20 questions) eventually going back for seconds of the juicy watermelon.

Tom returns to the water/shaving cream play, where she dumps the foamy purple water into a channel someone dug in the sand. Water moves down the small "river" to a hole at the end. Tom and her friends dump more and more water, making the hole into a "pool." Tom takes off her shoes and jumps into the muddy water hole, accidentally splashing another child. The splashed child is crying, and Tom looks uncomfortable during the interaction. A teacher standing nearby walks closer and asks the girls if they need his help. After a bit of discussion, Tom agrees to look around before jumping in the puddle again, and the other child is encouraged to keep her distance from the water play if she doesn't want to get wet. Within moments, the play resumes. The long morning of play stretches for three hours of uninterrupted exploration and deep interest.

### **Circle, Lunch, and Restful Reflection**

The teachers let the children know that circle time will be happening soon to allow them time to finish their work. Tom spends an extra few minutes in her water play, rinses off in the outdoor shower, and changes her clothes. By the time she joined the circle, someone else was sitting next to me (her teacher) as I led the welcome song. This is a big disappointment for Tom and she lets me know. "I wanted to sit there!" Tom cries. "You really wanted to sit next to me," I say. Tom nods, scowling. "You are disappointed and a little mad?" I guess. Tom continues to frown. "Everett is sitting here next to me now, but how about we sit together at lunch?" This helps, and Tom joins the group. After a few raucous rounds of "Skiddamarink" and "Down By The Bay," we read and act out the story "Caps For Sale." All the children transform into cheeky monkeys who steal the caps from the peddler. Tom gleefully stands up on a milk crate (a pretend branch in the tree) and shouts, "Tzz, Tzz Tzz," copying the Peddler from the story. As the story and the circle time come to an end, the children ask for the "Jumping Bean" song. Tom waits for her name to be sung... "Tom is a jumping bean, jumping bean, jumping bean, she likes to jump all day..." Tom jumps on one foot all the way to the faucet to wash her hands before retrieving her lunch box.

After some negotiation about who would sit where Tom settled down next to me to enjoy her lunch. Since the children all bring their lunches, there are a variety of foods

to see and smell. "Whoever has pasta is on my team!" Tom calls out. She is met with the voices of other children: "I do!" "I do!" and "Whoever has cucumber is on my team." This game continues amidst the teacher's gentle reminders to focus on eating. When the children finish their lunches, they clean them up, go to the bathroom, wash their hands, and head over to "make their beds" under the large fig tree. A teacher meets them there and begins reading stories before nap. Quiet music is playing on a portable speaker hanging from a branch on the fig tree, and when the stories are over, the children lay down to rest or sleep. Tom seems to have a lot to process as she lies, looking up at the big green leaves of the tree. Neighborhood noises (a bird, a far-off train whistle, a leaf blower down the street, people walking their dog, the Amazon delivery van) surround the peaceful resting space, and one by one, many children drift off to sleep, including Tom.

### **Gratitude, Glue Guns, and Reflectors: Afternoon Adventures**

When Tom wakes from her nap, she meanders to the table where her journal (a notebook of blank paper) is waiting. Tom selects a page and fills it with a colorful marker drawing (including a rainbow heart). Tom brings her completed picture to me and asks that I "write her words." She tells me the story of her picture; I write it word for word and then read it back to her. "Grateful page!" she reminds me, and we turn to the back of the journal, where we write her gratitude for the day. "I'm thankful for my mom, my baby, Adina, you, Ariel, my whole family, markers, soccer and Bryn." Tom places the journal in the basket and joins her friends at the "glue gun station."

Tom is an expert glue gunner and has created many artifacts which she usually incorporates into her play. Today, she is working with an old compact disk, sequins, tiles, and craft sticks. I resist the urge to ask her what she is making because my query may interrupt her creative flow and her ownership over her creation. The result looks a bit like a lollipop (CD with a stick handle). Tom carefully walks, holding the stick and tilting the CD to dance the light reflections across the cement walkway and nearby benches. She is absorbed in her exploration until she notices Florence watching. She shares her discovery, prompting Florence and several other children to make similar "tools." We now have a team of "reflectors."

The reflector-making slows when the children see that the afternoon snack has arrived: snap peas, mini peppers, and hummus. Tom washes her hands and selects her snack. A teacher from the other yard brings a few children over to play, and Tom asks to go to the "backyard." The teacher agrees, so Tom cleans up her snack, grabs her water bottle, and walks with the teacher through the school to the other yard.

### **Big Body Play and Goodbyes: Winding Down the Day**

Tom is a gifted climber and spends a few moments on the climbing wall, climbing up and traversing back and forth across it. When she tires of this activity, she runs to the merry-go-round, engaging in her signature move of climbing up and spinning over the round top of the apparatus. Tom begins running while holding the rails to get the merry-go-round spinning. She jumps on and rides the momentum she has created. There are lots of activities to explore in the backyard; however, Tom seems keen on engaging in big-body play, running in a game of chase, climbing up the slide and sliding back down, riding the balance bike, and returning to the merry-go-round. Tom notices that some of the children are getting picked up and asks the teacher to take her back to "her yard" to wait for her mom.

Tom settles back down into the reading nook and ends her day where it began, engrossed in the imaginary space of stories. Tom's mom arrives, pushes her new baby brother in a stroller, and joins Tom under the tree. Together, they read more stories until her mom tells Tom it is time to head home. Tom hugs me and her other teachers goodbye and gathers her backpack, water bottle, and glue gun creation. She walks out the gate, and I hear her explaining to her mom how she can reflect light with her "reflector." The outdoor classrooms and teachers she leaves today will be here to welcome her back tomorrow for more creative, sensory-rich, independent, and cooperative play!

## Play and Self-Regulation

Ingrid Kanics

Play is a crucial aspect of childhood development, and it is safe to say that a child left to their own devices will not only engage in play but will dive deep into it to explore their world and figure out where they fit in this big world.

John Richer tells us, “Many activities that are necessary for our growth and development, for our well-being and happiness involve getting dirty - children’s exploration and play promotes their flexible adaptation to the world they will meet, their ability realistically to appraise risks; and to balance proper independence with social understanding” (2004, p. 1).

### Play Defined

Play comes in many shapes and forms. So, it is important to define play for the purpose of this discussion. Many will agree that play is a spontaneous, voluntary, and pleasurable experience where the child engages with an object, their environment, and/or relationships with others. Play is typically done for its own sake. It is more about the process than about the end goal. It is driven by the child’s want to explore and discover the world around them. So, play, in this case, will be defined as free play driven by the child’s desire to engage and understand their world.

### Self-Regulation Defined

Now, let’s define self-regulation. Shanker says, “Self-regulation is the ability to manage your own energy states, emotions, behaviors, and attention in ways that are socially acceptable and help achieve positive goals, such as maintaining good relationships, learning, and maintaining well-being” (2016, p. 5).

It is through play that children develop a variety of self-regulation skills; some of these include:

- **Modulating emotions** (e.g., calming down after a frustrating moment during a play activity)
- **Managing frustration** (e.g., persisting through a challenging puzzle they might be playing with)

- **Regulating arousal levels** (e.g., calming down or energizing themselves while they play)

Self-regulation is closely linked to brain development, particularly in the areas responsible for processing sensory information:

- **Brainstem:** regulates basic functions like breathing, heart rate, and arousal levels
- **Cerebellum:** coordinates movement, balance, and sensory integration
- **Prefrontal cortex:** manages executive functions, decision-making, and self-regulation

Since many of these areas of the brain undergo massive development during early childhood, play can significantly impact the integration of sensory inputs that support this development process.

Very young children may struggle with processing all the information they gather from their sensory systems. They will seek input from parents and caregivers to help them manage all they are experiencing. During early childhood, it is essential that we create environments and foster positive relationships with each child.

Young children are often seeking someone ‘older and wiser’ to help them learn to regulate themselves. This is frequently referred to as co-regulation. “Co-regulation is defined as warm and responsive interactions that provide support, coaching, and modeling children need to ‘understand, express, and modulate their thoughts, feelings and behavior” (Murray et al. 2015, p.3).

Through co-regulation, we provide the child with comfort and security as they experience the world and a safe way to learn the new skills they will need to be successful every day. We use play as the bridge or scaffold to model and support them as they learn to regulate their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.

## **Play and Self-Regulation**

Play has a significant role in developing self-regulation in children. Here are some ways play creates self-regulation connections in the brain.

1. **Exploration and Discovery using their sensory systems during play:**

Play allows children to explore their environment, experiment with different textures, temperatures, and sensations, and discover how their body responds to various stimuli. Dr. A. Jean Ayers tells us that children have an “inner drive” to explore their world and will seek the sensory input they need to master specific skills (2000, p. 167). We have multiple senses used during play to get a complete understanding of the world around us. These include:

Play helps children process and integrate sensory information from each sense:

**Visual:** play with colors, shapes, patterns, and tracking moving objects

**Auditory:** play with music, sounds, and rhythms

**Tactile:** play with textures, temperatures, and vibrations

**Taste:** Play with a wide range of taste qualities, such as sweet, sour, bitter, salty, or savory.

**Smell:** play with a wide range of odors, including fruity, fragrant, spicy, woody/resinous, foul/pungent, burn, or chemical

**Vestibular:** play with movement (linear, rotational, spinning), balance, and experiencing the pull of gravity

**Proprioceptive:** play with body awareness, posture, understanding how much force to use while engaged in play, and motor planning.

**Interoception:** Children play with internal body awareness, including understanding their own body’s needs (such as the need to eat or use the bathroom), knowing how to address their own needs, and regulating their own emotions and behavior.

As children explore the world with their senses through play, they also gain an understanding of how their body responds and feels about that input (interoception). ‘Does this Play-Doh in my hands feel good or bad?’ The more diverse the sensory input



experienced during play, the more the child gains an understanding of how the world works and how they “feel” about it all. ‘Does the world feel like a fascinating place or a scary, dangerous space to me?’

Play activities integrate sensory information from multiple sensory systems, improving the brain's ability to process and integrate all this information and organize it for daily success. By engaging with different sensory experiences during play, children develop their ability to:

- Filter out irrelevant sensory information
- Focus on important stimuli
- Regulate their responses to sensory input

Through play, children discover how their senses work together to create a unified experience and understanding of the world around them. For example, while riding a tricycle, the child integrates visual, vestibular, and proprioceptive sensory input to understand the difference between moving forward and backward. They can then take this knowledge into pretend play scenarios with others.

## **2. Engagement of Motor Planning and Coordination during Play:**

Play that engages muscle and movement activities like obstacle courses, balance beams, and climbing improves motor planning and coordination, which also builds self-regulation. These activities require children to:

- Plan and execute movements
- Integrate sensory information (e.g., visual, vestibular, proprioceptive)
- Adjust movements based on feedback from their body and environment.

Motor planning involves multiple steps, including coming up with the idea, planning how the idea will happen, figuring out the sequence of the activities to make the idea happen, engaging in and executing the idea, and finally, gauging whether they were successful in completing the whole idea as they planned. The child must be able to problem-solve as they play if their ideas are not playing out as they expected. This allows them to be creative and innovative and explore multiple options while playing.

### 3. The Power of Pretend Play and Social Interactions:

Pretend Play helps children develop social skills, empathy, and understanding of others' perspectives, all of which build self-regulation. In pretend play, children get to “try on” all the different roles of daily life while they play, seeing how they fit and how they ‘feel’ about these different roles.

Pretend play and social interaction during play help children develop social skills, such as:

- Reading nonverbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, body language),
- Understanding others' perspectives and emotions
- Regulate their emotions and responses in social situations or pretend play scenarios they explore with others.

Pretend play and social interactions help children develop emotional regulation skills, which are closely tied to the sense of interoception. Wagenfeld reminds us, "There is a strong connection between interoception, emotions, and emotional experience. More broadly, there is a relationship between well-organized sensory systems and sound mental health" (2023, p.117-8).

Emotional regulation includes skills including:

- **Recognizing emotions:** identifying and understanding emotions in themselves and others
- **Regulating emotions:** managing and modulating emotional responses
- **Expressing emotions:** communicating emotions through language, art, or movement

By exploring and expressing emotions through play, children better understand their internal physical and emotional landscape and improve their ability to regulate their emotions as they play. This helps them broaden their understanding of what the world feels like for others, allowing them to put themselves in another’s shoes with empathy

and understanding. It builds social communication skills that allow them to verbalize this knowledge with others while playing.

### **Play, Self-regulation, and Lifelong Success**

Dr. A. Jean Ayers states, “Play expands competence. The child may not need this competence until later in life, but he won’t develop much competence unless he plays effectively as a child” (2000, p.15).

Current research is showing us that by engaging in free play activities during early childhood, children develop self-regulation skills that result in lifelong skills such as:

- **Academic success** (e.g., focusing in class, completing assignments)
- **Social success** (e.g., cooperating with peers, understanding social norms)
- **Emotional well-being** (e.g., managing stress, regulating emotions)

Furthermore, research by Taylor and Butts-Wilmsmeyer with kindergarten children shows “that green schoolyards support children’s self-regulation development, and the higher the frequency of visits, and the more minutes weekly, the greater the gains” (2020, p. 1). So, where children play also impacts their self-regulation development.

Ultimately, self-directed play in natural settings is a great way for children to develop the many self-regulation skills they will need to succeed in the world, so let them play outside as much as you can!

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# How Parents Can Support The Child's Right To Play

- [Playful Parenting](#)
- [Supporting Children's Play in This Century of Technology](#)



## Playful Parenting: How Parents Can Promote Play

Melissa Briggs

### Problem Statement- Issues

Play is misunderstood and not recognized as the language of a child. Recognizing the importance of play is essential for parents to understand and use it effectively. Parents often seek connections and a way to get involved in their children's lives. Parents also hope and long for their children to grow and build resiliency and strong character. Play can accomplish both of these needs. Play can give parents the skills to engage and connect with their children. Play can also allow children to challenge themselves, develop and grow their strengths, and work through their limitations. Play is a powerful and useful means of communication. This essay will explore the importance of play and strategies for how parents can promote play to develop a child and build a connection and relationship with a child.

### Background

The history of play is deeply intertwined with the history of humanity itself. Play, in various forms, has likely existed for as long as humans have roamed the Earth. It's a fundamental aspect of human nature, observable in humans and animals (Elkind, 2007; Frost et al., 2012; Ginsberg, 2007; Hughes, 2010; Piaget, 1962; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978).

History includes evidence of play, including physical activities and creative expressions (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). We have seen play serve the purpose of creating social bonds, skill development, and cognitive stimulation.

Play between a parent and child begins early in their relationship. Many of the first interactions and bonding experiences are play-related, such as making sounds, creating facial expressions, and engaging in physical play, like bouncing on a parent's lap. These early playful interactions are not just fun; they also lay the foundation for a secure relationship, instilling a sense of safety and trust in the child (Cochran et al., 2010; Kottman, 2011; Landreth, 2012; Van Fleet, 2005) This reassures parents that they are on the right track in building a strong connection with their child.

Throughout history, play has served as a form of entertainment and a means of learning, socialization, and self-expression. Its significance in human development and well-being cannot be overstated (Broadhead et al., 2010).

## **Strategies**

**Provide a safe and stimulating environment:** Ensure the child can access a safe and conducive indoor and outdoor play environment. This can include a variety of toys, games, and materials that encourage exploration and creativity.

**Be a play partner:** Parents can actively play with their children. This strengthens the parent-child bond and provides opportunities for learning and social development (Schaefer & Drewes, Ed., 2014). It also benefits the parents as they express themselves and have joy and fun throughout the experience.

**Encourage unstructured and non-directive free play:** Allow children to engage in unstructured play, where they can explore and create without specific rules or goals (Bergen, 2002). This type of play fosters imagination, problem-solving skills, and independence. Play empowers children to challenge themselves and take on new ways of being.

**Limit Screen Time:** Set limits on screen time and encourage alternative forms of play such as physical activity, imaginative play, and social interactions. Screens can be highly engaging but may limit opportunities for other types of play essential for development.

**Provide creative and expressive toys:** Choose toys and materials that can be used in multiple ways and encourage open-ended play. Blocks, art supplies, dress-up clothes, and simple household items like pots and pans can spark creativity and imagination (Brown & Vaughn, 2009).

**Support Outdoor Play:** Encourage outdoor play whenever possible. Nature provides endless opportunities for exploration and sensory experiences, which benefit physical and mental health (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998).



Respect the child's choice: Allow children to choose their activities and follow their interests during playtime (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). This empowers them to take ownership of their play experiences and promotes autonomy.

Model Playfulness: Demonstrate a playful attitude and willingness to engage in activities that promote laughter and fun (Homeyer & Morrison, (2008). Children often learn by example, so parents who embrace playfulness are likelier to have children who do the same.

Create Play Rituals: Establish regular times for play, such as family game nights or weekend outdoor adventures. Consistent opportunities for play help children develop routines and provide a sense of security (Schaefer & Drewes (Eds, 2014)

Use Play as a way of Connecting: Play is a child's language (Smith, 2010). Engage in it to build an understanding of your child's world. Play is a way of bonding and creating positive memories with your child.

Celebrate Play: Recognize the importance of play in your child's life and celebrate their achievements and creativity during play (Ginsberg, 2007). This can be done through encouragement and participation in their play experience.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

As parents engage in their children's playful worlds, they should reflect on and recognize what information they are learning about their children and how to use it to connect and develop meaningful relationships.

Parents can maintain this playful response by finding ways to be playful in each aspect of their lives and challenging themselves to be flexible, spontaneous, and engaging.

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## Supporting Children's Play in this Century of Technology

Ruth Ann Ball

### Introduction

Think about how play is important to you. What is Play? Did you as a parent, play as a child? Where did you play? What kind of play did you engage in? How did it make you feel? How do you play as an adult?

To support a child in play, you must understand where, when, why, and how you played as a child, adolescent, and adult. Even in adulthood, play has a purpose; it is a process of active engagement. Play relieves stress. It is timeless – a time when we are lost in the moment, we can feel pleasure and feel alive. There are no goals, and you decide what the play will be. Play is different for each person. Play for an adult can be reading a book, dancing, playing a sport, gardening, or just listening and getting lost in music.

Parents are children's first and most influential teachers. Recognizing the developmental benefits of play from infancy to adolescence equips parents with the knowledge to foster their children's creative and cognitive growth through Play. This paper offers research supporting the idea that children learn through play-based experiences at home and in the classroom and provides ideas for how to bring child-initiated play back into their daily lives.

### Theoretical Perspectives on Play

Many theorists provide a deeper understanding of why play is essential. A German educator, Friedrich Froebel, believed that "Play is the highest level of child development. It is the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling...It...constitutes the source of all that can benefit the child...At this age, play is never trivial; it is serious and deeply significant (Lilley, 1967, p. 84)." Utilizing various materials and opportunities for imaginative play, artistic expression, and storytelling helps children communicate and make sense of their feelings and ideas (Lilley, 1967). Engaging in nature is a vital aspect of Froebel's theory. Froebel recognized the power and opportunities nature provided. In Lilley, 1967, p.148, Froebel stated, "The child should experience nature 'in

all its aspects – form, energy, substance, sound and colour." Parents can enhance children's love of the outdoors by going on nature walks to feel and smell, helping children discover and appreciate what nature offers. Allowing children the freedom to play outdoors with neighborhood children provides opportunities for children to foster skills of working together, collaborating, learning to share, taking turns, and negotiating skills, essential skills needed for social and emotional development.

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, focuses his theory on social-cultural development. This theory is about the importance of social interaction and cultural context in a child's cognitive development. Vygotsky highlights the significance of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as scaffolding a child's learning, which means building on one experience to create a new understanding. Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the role of social interactions in learning (Eun, 2019). Parents can scaffold learning by offering guidance, asking open-ended questions, and encouraging critical thinking through cultural tools, language, and writing, shaping how children think about their world. Parents may wonder why children use private speech (talking to themselves) during play or problem-solving tasks. Self-talk helps children regulate their thinking and actions. According to Vygotsky, make-believe and pretend play are crucial to a child's development (Eun, 2019).

Susan Isaac, a prominent British psychoanalyst, built her theory around the work of Froebel and Montessori. Maria Montessori says that "play is a child's work and how a child makes sense of their world" (2013). Play is powerful and serves as a form of communication. Play is the vehicle for development, the 'breath of life to the child since it is through play activities that he finds mental ease, and can work upon his wishes, fears, and fantasies to integrate them into a living personality' (Isaacs, 1951, p.210). Isaacs felt that one of the nursery environment's most valuable contributions was providing opportunities for cooperative Play (Mickelburgh, 2018). Children could explore relationships with family and friends and develop positive social interactions. As well as the emotional benefits of Play, Isaacs saw it as a means for children to discover and experiment with the world around them (Mickelburgh, 2018). Play allowed emotional and imaginative development to coexist alongside practical inquiry. Children's play was

to be respected and left free to evolve on their terms because, as Isaacs explained, 'play has the greatest value for the young child when it is really free and his own' (Isaacs, 1971, p.133).

Children's play happens in stages, as described by Mildred Parten. Dr. Parten is a sociology professor at the University of Minnesota's Institute of Child Development. Parten wrote in "her classic 1932 study that helps parents and educators understand how social play changes and develops as children grow." The stages are

1. Unoccupied Play, when infants observe their hands and feet but do not engage with others socially
2. Solitary Play when children play alone and focus on what they are doing
3. Onlooker play (age two and a half to three years) when a child watches others play without actively joining
4. Parallel Play, where two-year-olds play separately but begin to mimic the actions of others nearby
5. Associative Play is where children have separate goals and begin interacting with others
6. Cooperative Play is where children are interested in both people and organized activity. During role-play, children work together on a play scenario, cooperating together to make the play scenario happen. "Cooperative play helps children develop communication skills and advanced organization skills as they work on a shared objective during play." (Thomas, 2023).

Past theories and present research show that play is vital for a child's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional growth. When parents understand the importance of children's play, recognize the stages of play, and are aware of how play assists children in making sense of the world around them, they can provide experiences, activities, and toys/equipment to support their learning and increase the child's cultural development.

## **Message on the Importance of Play from The American Academy of Pediatrics**

Ginsburg, 2007 in a report for the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), stresses the importance of play by stating, "Play is essential to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth (p. 183)." Ginsburg, 2007 describes why play is essential: "It is through play that children at a very early age engage and interact in the world around them. Play allows children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles, sometimes in conjunction with other children or adult caregivers. As they master their world, play helps children develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and the resiliency they will need to face future challenges. Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, share, negotiate, resolve conflicts, and learn self-advocacy skills. When play is child-driven, children practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their areas of interest, and ultimately engage fully in the passions they wish to pursue. Ideally, much of play involves adults, but when play is controlled by adults, children acquiesce to adult rules and concerns and lose some of the benefits play offers them, particularly in developing creativity, leadership, and group skills (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 183)".

### **Appropriate Approaches and Strategies for Parents**

A challenge for parents with many children is respecting and celebrating each child's unique ability and interest. Every child has an individual personality and interests. It is essential to be "present" and listen to children.

Strengthening parents' understanding of the value of play is a starting point. Speaking to families at meetings or conferences about why play is essential and providing information on how play is critical to a child's development can help parents see the link between play and later school success. Having parents recall their childhood play memories and how their play helped them develop a range of skills will allow parents to recognize the value of play and the joy it brings to childhood. Following the play memory activity, helping parents see the value in allowing their children to have similar experiences and asking what they might try can give parents a plan to incorporate more play opportunities for their children.

Physically, children need places and opportunities to run, jump, roll, climb, hop, skip, and crawl. Parents can use local parks or provide big boxes, sheets to make tents, or other inexpensive materials and equipment at home. Being outdoors and active is healthy for children (Bongiorno, n.d.). Play reduces stress and anxiety, increasing physical, social, emotional, and cognitive health while providing children with an outlet for their physical activity needs. Parents need to make time for their children (Bongiorno, n.d.). Talking, listening to their questions when they ask "why," and asking questions to help children understand how the world works. Providing books and reading to infants and, as children grow, continuing to read for at least 20 minutes daily can increase language development and build vocabulary. Playing car games while driving or traveling, instead of putting on a video or providing an iPad or other device, builds strong relationships.

Children enjoy doing what they see happening in their world through role-playing. They are critical observers and want to do what they see the adults around them doing. "Turn everyday activities into opportunities to play. Play make-believe when cleaning the house, take turns making a story while running errands, sort foods by color or shape when shopping." (Bongiorno, n.d. & Blog, n.d.)

Children imitate what they see and hear. Ensuring that children are not exposed to violence or swearing on television, in movies, or at home will prevent them from repeating these words or imitating the violence they see with others. When children see their parents interacting at home, the words they hear (positive or negative) are viewed as appropriate because they listen to their parents saying those words.

When families eat out at a restaurant or go shopping, orders are taken, money is exchanged, and conversation at the table is observed and played out in a dramatic play. Though, understandably, parents might want to have a conversation together, engaging the child in conversation at the table versus entertaining them with a device will increase their capacity to carry on a conversation, expand their vocabulary, and strengthen relationships.



The American Academy of Pediatrics (2021) has three messages for families:

- Your child loves playing with you. You can find simple items such as crayons, paper, empty cardboard boxes, balls, and other things to play together. The quality of time and level of play are the most important factors.
- Playful moments are everywhere! Make-believe while running errands, sorting foods at the grocery store, or turning cleaning into a game.
- It can be challenging to find safe places for your family to play. Consider ways to play in your home or find safe places in your community. Choose your child's safety over outdoor play opportunities.

## Conclusion

Play and keen observation are how children learn about the places where they live and their environment. Parents need to know that they are the child's first teacher. How they act, talk, and respond to their children and engage them in constructive, positive activities impacts their growth toward being productive, loving, and kind adults.

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## The Healing Power Of Play

- [Play and Resilience](#)
- [The Critical Role of Intergenerational Play in Bridging Generations and Healing Trauma](#)
- [Play for Adults: Healing the Inner Child Through Play](#)
- [Play in Hospitals](#)



## Play and Resilience

Stephanie Goloway, EdD

### **Problem statement- Issues**

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study alerted us to childhood adversity's prevalence and lifelong impact (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014). Ongoing research, anecdotal evidence, and reports of the global pandemic's impact on both children and adults have confirmed that both short-term challenges with learning and behavior and long-term challenges with mental health, including depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders, have increased in children, youth, and the general population.

Neuroscience has attributed these increases in part to the effects of toxic stress and the trauma response on developing brains (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020). Those who work with children, teens, and adults across a wide variety of settings seek strategies to support those who struggle with trauma and toxic stress while meeting the needs of all. How do we help people bounce back after challenges and toxic stress?

Resilience is this capacity to overcome adversity. This white paper examines the neurodevelopmental construct of resilience and the importance of play to its development. It suggests using resilience as a framework for creating play-rich environments where all children and adults can thrive.

### **Background**

Previously, much of the research on resilience focused on the study of individuals who had overcome extraordinary adversity. More recent work by Dr. Ann Masten (Masten, 2015) and Harvard's Center on the Developing Child has created a framework that examines resilience as a universal neurodevelopmental construct. This framework offers insight into the kinds of experiences that support the development of resilience in all of us.

Masten's research showed that not all children who experience adversity face a downward trajectory. Protective factors may offset the negative impact of living with abuse and other ACEs. Masten identified protective factors that were particularly potent in helping children move toward healthy adulthood. These factors are not the stuff of legends, as previous research on resilience had assumed. Instead, they are common experiences that Masten called "ordinary magic."

Using Masten's work as a framework, Harvard's Center on the Developing Child (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015) studied resilience and has outlined four specific components. These are supported by research across disciplines and have been found to have neurological bases. The protective experiences contributing to resilience are: (a) at least one stable, caring, and supportive relationship with an adult; (b) a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control (initiative); (c) strong adaptive skills of executive functions and self-regulation; and (d) a supportive faith- or culture-based context.

## **Key Protective Factors for Resilience**

### **Relationships**

The single most important factor that contributes to the development of resilience is a stable, committed relationship with a supportive adult. In addition to the relationship with a primary caregiver, current resilience research has also investigated the importance of other kinds of child-adult relationships (e.g., grandparents, neighbors, teachers, etc.) Peer relationships throughout the lifespan are also protective factors (Masten, 2015; National Scientific Center on the Developing Child, 2015). As we examine how play supports the development of resilience, this more inclusive definition of "relationship" becomes essential.

### **Self-efficacy/Initiative**

Also known as agency and perceived control, "... the experience of overcoming manageable challenges and a robust sense of self-efficacy, in turn, fosters persistence

in the face of adversity, which is more likely to lead to success than giving up" (Masten, 2015, p. 161). Agency and perceived control include skills and dispositions such as trying new activities, showing an interest in learning new things, using different ways to solve a problem, and showing confidence in one's abilities (LeBuffe & Naglieri, 2012).

## **Executive Functions and Self-Regulation**

**Executive functions (EF)** have been called the "air traffic control system of the brain" (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011). Slowly developing over the first several decades of life, they are a cluster of functions based in the prefrontal cortex (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016).

Dr. Dorothy Diamond, a leading researcher on EF in children, has identified three primary EFs: inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility. These lay the foundation for other higher-order thinking skills and impact all areas of cognitive and social functioning (Diamond, 2012; 2014; 2016; Diamond & Lee, 2011).

**Self-regulation** has been studied extensively in recent decades and has been identified as one of the factors most predictive of life and academic success (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2016; Masten, 2015). A complex cluster of skills with a neurobiological base, self-regulation overlaps with executive functions and includes self-management of attention, arousal, emotions, and actions.

**Cultural Affirmation is a** feeling that one is part of something bigger than oneself, which is critical to this protective factor. This protective factor can be nurtured through associations such as a faith-based group, a supportive connection related to cultural traditions or one's community, or any context that provides hope and a sense of belonging. A community that values and encourages rich and pervasive play can also serve as a cultural affirmation for its members.

## **Appropriate Approaches/Strategies**

As Masten pointed out, the experiences that nurture the capacity for resilience are nothing extraordinary. Rather than a pre-packaged program that targets social and emotional competencies related to resilience, we can look instead to "ordinary magic." One source of this magic is play, according to the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University:

"It's not by chance that all children, regardless of where they live, in the history of the species, use play as a way to develop skills. It's the way children learn to master their environment...And if you think about what resilience is all about, resilience is mastering your environment...**Your ability, your natural ability to play, is one of the most important strategies that we have developmentally to build resilience in the face of adversity.**" (Shonkoff, 2022).

While all play provides experiences that develop resilience, different kinds of play offer unique opportunities. As child advocates, we look for opportunities to support resilience in every child. As play advocates, understanding how different play interactions specifically deliver each protective factor affords us myriad opportunities to expand and deepen our support of play. The following discussion is not inclusive but highlights several connections between play and resilience.

### **How Schema Play Supports the Development of Resilience**

Schema play is characterized by repeated actions in the child's explorations of their environment. The repetitions of these behaviors, e.g., filling and dumping or carrying things from one place to another, often show a pattern (Athey, 1990).

#### **Relationships**

When adults tune into how very young children interact with and explore their worlds through schema play, we can offer them more opportunities for personally

meaningful play. This nurtures the child-adult relationship. Further, children naturally tune into each other's authentic play explorations. They often imitate or join in when they observe others' actions. Even parallel play allows young children to form early friendships based on shared interests and learning.

### **Initiative**

Schema play is child-initiated and guided, the source of initiative. The child repeats sensorimotor actions that are personally intriguing and motivating. They solve problems: Why does the Nerf ball roll across the floor when I push it, but the rock sits there? (*Trajectory Schema*). Their competence in mastering the world increases exponentially as they see both predictable similarities in their actions and fascinating differences through endless permutations of each schema (*Agency and Self-Efficacy*).

### **Executive Functions**

One has only to observe a toddler diligently carrying blocks and animals, and then scraps of paper across the room repeatedly (*Transportation Schema*) to recognize the working memory and focus schema play nurtures! It also offers children a chance to develop cognitive flexibility as they explore each schema with first one material and context and then another. And, when they are in a "yes" environment and allowed to take safe risks, they have many opportunities to practice their growing inhibitory control, as they, for example, overcome the "ick factor" of picking up a handful of slime to see what happens when they throw it.

### **Self-regulation**

Young children learn to regulate their bodies by using them. Schema play offers the natural feedback of the physical world that helps children better understand when too much, too little, too fast, or too slow interferes with their desired outcomes.

Emotional regulation also develops. A child exploring the Dynamic Vertical Schema by building a tower with assorted loose parts quickly discovers that not all objects work well for this. Repeated attempts and crashes can be frustrating. Dissolving



into tears, however, will NOT get the tower built. The child's personal goals can scaffold their self-regulation, and peer or adult support of their play can sometimes be helpful.

## **How Make-Believe Play Supports the Development of Resilience**

Make-believe play, also known as sociodramatic play, dramatic play, fantasy play, and pretend play, develops as children's ability to use symbols and symbolic thinking comes online in the early childhood years.

### **Relationships**

By its very nature, make-believe play is social. Children play with each other and learn to cooperate, collaborate, and navigate differences as they co-create stories about puppies, princesses, and power rangers. However, in addition to the first-hand experiences with personal interactions they gain, make-believe play is a laboratory for investigating all kinds of relationships: How do mamas feed and talk to their babies? Why is the bad guy always mad? Do princesses get to have pets?

### **Initiative**

The child's intrinsic motivation and agency are central to the very nature of play (e.g., Sutton-Smith, 1997; 2017; Singer & Singer, 2013). Few adults would develop themes and plots found in the rich pretending of children in an environment that supports make-believe play! From the problems solved (Who gets to be the baby? Do bad guys get pizza?) to the motivation to resolve those problems so that the play can continue, make-believe play is where children's self-efficacy and initiative reign supreme.

### **Executive Functions**

Mature make-believe play is a lynchpin in Bodrova and Leong's work on executive functions (Bodrova & Leong, 2024). Cognitive flexibility is at its core: How does one behave as a witch when no tall black hats are available? How can you make stew when you have a pot and no plastic ingredients to toss in (one group of children popped the heads off mini-baby dolls to solve the problem...)

It takes working memory to remember that if you are a dog, you must: 1) crawl around; 2) talk only in barks or bark-like words, and 3) eat your food without using your hands. Inhibitory control kicks in, for example, when a child has seen superheroes shove foes against walls on TV but knows that this will end the play. Instead, she controls the impulse and says: "Kabash! Pretend you fall down and can't move because of my powers!"

### **Self-regulation**

For children engaged in a make-believe story with friends, nothing is worth causing the story to end. So those impulses to yell, push, stomp away, etc., are often regulated to keep the play going. Research has substantiated the increased ability to delay gratification and self-regulate to sustain the story (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Bodrova et al., 2013; Diamond & Ling, 2016; Leong & Bodrova, 2006, 2012).

### **How Constructive Play Supports the Development of Resilience**

Constructive play involves making and building, whether with blocks, rocks, loose parts, or circuits.

### **Relationships**

Constructive play may be collaborative ("Hey guys! Let's build a fort!"), or individual. However, even for a solitary engineer working on a tower, it can support the development of relationships. Anyone who has witnessed a child knocking over another's building, accidentally or on purpose, understands that constructive play is a way to learn how relationships work. In addition to fostering communication and cooperation between peers, constructive play offers the chance to collaborate with older peers and even adults with ideas to scaffold and extend the play.

## **Initiative**

Constructive play is rich with problem-finding and problem-solving opportunities. Naturally engaging, the constructing process also offers builders the chance to persist until their project is complete and feel a sense of agency at their accomplishments.

## **Executive Functions and Self-Regulation**

Constructing invites builders to think outside the blocks, which develops cognitive flexibility. The physical and mental focus required to support working memory, inhibitory control, and self-regulation, as do the inevitable structural, balance, and gravity challenges.

## **How Big Body and Risky Play Support the Development of Resilience**

Big body and rough-and-tumble play are distinct from what is often called "risky play." However, the overlaps are significant, especially when the players are young and under the watchful eyes of cautious grown-ups.

## **Relationships**

Children thrive on physical contact and sharing space with others engaged in big-body play. This activity develops perspective-taking (the ability to see things from a different physical or mental point of view), which is very important for healthy communication and relationships.

Risky play has its own relationship-building capacity. Peers encourage or dissuade us, make suggestions, and collaborate. Adults can do the same if they are not determined to stop all such play in the interest of safety.

## **Initiative, Executive Functions, and Self-regulation**

Much sanctioned big-body play (i.e., organized sports) is not child-directed. When it is, children can create and adhere to their own rules, solve problems, use working memory to complete tasks, and exercise self-regulation to ensure that no one gets hurt. Because when someone gets hurt, the game ends.

Current research on *Playwork* and adventure playgrounds has examined the need for children to take self-modulated and self-initiated risks (Brown & Patte, 2013). Often missing from 21st-century childhoods because of safety concerns, regulations, and the reduced role of child-directed play from preschool through adolescence, the absence of such risk is seen as a loss of opportunity to develop the mastery and resilience that leads to mental, physical, and emotional health.

## **Conclusion/Recommendations**

When one has a deep understanding of play and the protective factors that support the development of resilience, it is not hard to make the connection between play and whatever standards "guide" our work with children. Both play and resilience have been critical aspects of the human experience long before standards were even a glimmer in policymakers' eyes. Both play and resilience will ride the waves of changing standards and be with us long after each succeeding set of parameters is literal and digital dust.

As play advocates, we are responsible for connecting the dots for those who need to see them. Most importantly, it is our responsibility to ensure that this powerful and primary way of supporting the neurodevelopmental capacity to adapt to change and challenge is preserved in the environments in which we work and play. By recognizing and valuing the specific conditions needed for the development of resilience, we can prevent resilience from becoming yet another buzzword that glimmers in and out of our awareness.

We all face challenges. We all need to overcome adversities, large and small, and move forward. With play in our toy boxes, the development and practice of resilience can affirm and enrich our humanity with a sparkle of "ordinary magic" and joy.

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## The Critical Role of Intergenerational Play in Bridging Generations and Healing Trauma--- A Tribute to Dr. Edgar Klugman

Delores Stegelin and Jennifer Kashuck

### Problem Statement and Issues

*Intergenerational Play* is an important issue. In the USA, we traditionally form groups by age levels that tend to stratify the population and separate the generations. We see this practice in schools, faith-based and community-based activities for children, youth, adults, and the elderly. Dr. Edgar Klugman, a well-known family systems and play researcher, advocated for greater interactions between the generations, particularly older people and younger children (Klugman, Stegelin, & Kashuck, 2023). *This paper presents the case for implementing more intergenerational play-based activities in our communities that strengthen and enhance the quality of relationships between the oldest and the youngest members of our society.*

### Background

Much of the early research on the need for relationships between the generations arises from the trauma related to the Holocaust, in which young children were separated abruptly from siblings, parents, grandparents, and other close relatives. Many of these children never saw their family members again, and all experienced trauma as they set off on their own new lives, often in a new and strange environment and without the nurturing support of their parents and close family members. The trauma endured by Holocaust survivors had a major impact on their lives and negatively impacted their physical and mental health. This research was conducted by family systems researchers, including Dr. Edgar Klugman. Important research questions emerged: *How does trauma impact future generations—children and grandchildren of trauma survivors? What are strategies to heal these individuals?*

#### ***The Early Research***

Research on the benefits of intergenerational relationships as a form of healing began after WWII. Post-Holocaust research provided some of the first



intergenerational relationship research. Beral et al. (2010) noted that research in the 50s and 60s was limited to psychiatrists who treated Holocaust survivors as patients and were focused only on the atrocities they suffered. After a period of silence in the 70s, a shift in focus was made toward the long-term effects of the Holocaust trauma. It is important to note why the resurgence in research after this period of silence. Beral et al. explain a rise in understanding survivors' needs in the political arena and public debate. This refers to reparations such as financial compensation, rehabilitation for the handicapped, special accommodations, as well as long-term impacts on Holocaust survivors' families, particularly children and grandchildren.

In examining secondary and tertiary generations of Holocaust survivors, early research indicates an essential factor in their ability to function is *how parents have communicated their experiences to their offspring*. In many cases, they have not communicated these experiences at all. Barel et al., in defining secondary traumatization as "the effects of events that did not take place in the lives of the second-generation participants themselves but in those of their parents," mention a difference in effects in offspring, whose parents may or may not have communicated their experiences in a verbal or nonverbal way. Wiseman et al. (2002), as cited in Dashorst et al. (2019), examined interpersonal problems and central relationship patterns of survivors who grew up with the silent presence of the mother's trauma. They found groups did not differ in their current mental health. Still, those who reported non-verbal communication and little information about their mother's trauma exhibited more *interpersonal distress* than those who experienced informative verbal communication. They also found differences in central relationship patterns with parents and spouses. Many survivors felt that they could not reveal their experiences and that the Holocaust was a taboo topic; thus, they remained silent in their post-Holocaust lives. In the U.S., there was a wish to forget the terror of World War II and a need to avoid a preoccupation with their past (Hodgkins & Douglas, 1984, as cited in Greene, 2002).

Dashorst et al. (2019), in their examination of attachment theory, surmise that parents still dealing with unresolved problems from their past may have difficulty attuning to the needs of their offspring, thus impacting the quality of their relationship.

Traumatic past experiences are transferred to events (and relationships) in the survivor's current life and do contribute to the offspring's mental health problems. They cite Wiseman et al. (2002) as reporting a perceived inability to provide the necessary physical and emotional care and sometimes a reversal of parent and child roles. Themes included overprotection and fear of separation, emotional neglect and unpredictable emotional reactions, and coercion of the child to please the parents and satisfy their needs. *Thus, they hypothesized that parental Holocaust experience does affect parenting abilities and does relate to unfavorable psychological development in offspring.*

Holocaust offspring families have been observed to express emotions more poorly than comparison families and were reported to be less assertive and less able to make their own decisions. (Gangi et al., 2009; Lerner et al., 2014, as cited in Dashorst et al., 2019). Thus, the voices of Holocaust survivors are very important, and these voices provide researchers with real-life examples of early trauma, including early separation from mothers and fathers, tragic and long-suffering deaths of family members in prison camps, and acute truncation from their places of origin, family identity, and sense of self and safety. Yet most of these young people grew into resilient and contributing citizens of the world. Dr. Edgar Klugman represents the early childhood trauma and survivorship of the Holocaust, and his story is compelling. The Holocaust provides a long and detailed history of family trauma and the immediate and long-term consequences on individuals, family relationships, and overall health and well-being.

Interestingly, it was concluded that those offspring in a two-survivor family, as opposed to a one-survivor family, were associated with more mental health problems and that mothers were more influential than fathers over their children. Transmission of trauma by the mother was characterized by more over-involvement than paternal, and this style of parenting was said to significantly predict posttraumatic symptoms in offspring (Dashorst et al., 2019). Holocaust offspring families have been observed to express emotions more poorly than comparison families and were reported to be less assertive and less able to make their own decisions. (Gangi et al., 2009; Lehrner et al., 2014, as cited in Dashorst et al., 2019).

### ***Contemporary Research***

More recent research on intergenerational relationships and the impact of trauma has focused *on the health, mental health, and psycho-social well-being* of those experiencing early trauma in their lives. The *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)* study set out to investigate the possible link between negative events in early childhood and negative health outcomes later in adulthood. *What if our most serious public health problems – cardiovascular disease, smoking, obesity, anxiety, and depression – were attributable to trauma experiences in early childhood?* The concepts for the ACEs Study grew out of Dr. Vincent Felitti's work helping individuals who were obese to lose weight through Positive Choice programs in the mid-1980s (Anda & Felitti, 2003). At the time, Felitti worked as a preventive medicine specialist at Kaiser Permanente in San Diego, CA. Dr. Felitti was surprised to find that the most likely to drop out of the program were the ones who were more successful in losing weight. Upon further investigation, Felitti realized that many of his patients had experienced various forms of abuse as young children and were using obesity as a shield against unwanted sexual attention or physical attacks. In addition, Felitti learned that several of his obese patients had, at some point, used tobacco, alcohol, or street drugs in attempts to cope with past adversity (Anda & Felitti, 2003).

Around the same time that Dr. Felitti was making these initial connections between child abuse and later adverse health outcomes, Dr. Robert Anda of the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) was studying similar medical and public health problems (Anda & Felitti, 2003). *Thus, Drs. Anda and Felitti teamed up to investigate the role of child abuse in medical, social, and public health problems.* The original ACEs Study grew out of this research. Drs. Anda and Felitti designed the ACE study to determine whether adverse experiences in childhood (prior to one's 18th birthday) could be associated with adverse health outcomes in adulthood. To this end, Drs. Anda and Felitti surveyed nearly 17,000 adults with healthcare coverage through Kaiser Permanente (ACEs Interface, 2014). The researchers asked 17 questions across seven categories of negative childhood experiences encompassing abuse (psychological, physical, and sexual) and household dysfunction (substance abuse, mental illness, mother being treated violently, and criminal behavior in the household).

The results of the original ACE Study were surprising – more than half of the participants reported experiencing at least one of the adverse events across the seven domains of abuse and household dysfunction. The most reported events were substance abuse in the household (26%), followed by sexual abuse (22%), and mental illness in the household (19%). Felitti and colleagues (1998) also found that ACEs were highly related – for participants reporting any ACEs, the probability of exposure to additional ACEs ranged from 65-93% (median 80%). Significantly, the groundbreaking study by Felitti et al. (1998) found that, as exposure to ACEs increased, the likelihood for unfavorable outcomes such as disease risk factors and incidence, fair or poor self-rated health, lack of healthcare utilization, and mortality also increased. In contrast, compared to participants without exposure to ACEs, those respondents with four or more categories of ACE exposure had an odds ratio of 12.2 for a history of suicide attempts. Individuals with more categories of ACE exposure were much more likely to experience a suicide attempt. *This research shows that ACEs are common and that ACEs are interrelated, and a clear dose-response relationship exists between ACEs and adverse health outcomes in adulthood. The information from this research is also important for developing and implementing prevention efforts and policies.*

### ***Psycho-social and Neurobiological Research***

In addition to the ACEs research linking childhood abuse to later adverse health outcomes, other research focuses on the impacts of early trauma on the individual's neurobiological, psychological, and social development. These studies also describe the healing process that can be embraced by family members, utilizing the strengths and assets of the family unit to heal and improve the mental and physical health of the family unit and the members involved. One study that is representative of the focus on the impact of trauma on the psycho-social and neurological development of trauma survivors is now presented. *Relational Ethics* is the theme of the research described by Fishbane (2019). Building on intergenerational family theory and developmental and interpersonal neurobiology, the dynamics of reactivity and pathways for growth are explored. Fishbane discusses the effects of parental sexual abuse on the neurological, psychological, and social development of their offspring, and she takes a "healing"

approach through psychotherapy to rewire the neurobiological reactions to diminish this form of intergenerational pain. Fishbane writes about how old resentments and unfinished business from the family of origin can constrain adults in their current relationships with parents or siblings and negatively affect relationships with partners or children; she explores how old wounds get reactivated in current relationships and contribute to the intergenerational transmission of painful legacies and trauma. Rather than being victims of parents or our past, we can become authors of our relational lives. Interventions are offered to help adult clients heal intergenerational wounds and create positive, constructive relationships with the family of origin (Fishbane, 2019). *The family is considered both in its cultural context—including stressors and resources for resilience—and in its life cycle context.* The aging process in the intergenerational family is discussed, focusing on ways adult children and their parents can grow and flourish with the challenges at this time of life. *Throughout, Fishbane encourages the theme of **relational ethics**—how we can live according to our values and then strive for our best self within intergenerational relationships. This article points to the importance of the healing process within the family unit. It views family dynamics as both the cause and solution for moving forward into healthy interactions and a stronger family unit.*

In summary, research conducted after the Holocaust, as well as more contemporary research on trauma and the healing process within the family context, conclude that family members can provide much-needed support to trauma survivors. This can be accomplished through healthy relationships that are developed through various means, including activities such as community-based shared play and recreational experiences, especially with older adults and younger children. These relationships contribute to the health and well-being of both generations and can provide healing for those who have experienced trauma.

### **Appropriate Approaches/Strategies-Practice, Policy, and Research**

Based on research findings that support intergenerational relationship building, the following strategies are recommended:

- 1) *Increase the mixing of generations* for recreational and functional activities.

Understanding the mutual needs and qualities of the generations results in higher

levels of empathy and caring for one another. This can contribute to the healing of individual and generational mental and physical wellbeing. Play-based community events and activities strengthen the quality of communication and interaction across the generations.

- 2) *Strengthen our research efforts* to better understand the benefits of intergenerational relationship building for both the older and younger generations. Diversify research methods to include qualitative and quantitative strategies and increase the research subjects' diversity of ethnic, SES, and cultural backgrounds. Study the benefits of intergenerational play-based community activities.
- 3) *Encourage family units to be more inclusive* of older family members in vacations, daily routines, housing units, and educational support. Older adults can provide childcare support, volunteer in classrooms, and engage in storytelling and play-based activities. Broaden our definition of play to include indoor and outdoor activities that encourage creativity, freedom of expression, and new ways of sharing ideas and feelings.
- 4) *Promote community- and play-based activities* across the generations in school, childcare, faith-based, youth, recreational, assisted living, and other diverse community settings.

## **Conclusion**

The research on intergenerational relationships and the benefits of mutually caring and sharing activities across the elderly and the younger populations strongly supports increased community-based activities that unite the generations. Many grandparents live hundreds of miles from their children and grandchildren, leaving a void in many families of the presence of the elderly. Through research, community practices, and policy-making, we can strengthen and enhance the quantity and quality of intergenerational relationships that benefit all.

## Recommendations

Most American families generally live in communities stratified by age, and many elderly people are not included in family-related community events. The research supports that, for both trauma-related and general health purposes, *intergenerational relationships enhance the quality of life for both older and younger family members*. As the U.S. population ages rapidly, there are many opportunities to include the elderly in our educational, faith-based, and community organizations and activities. These relationships will benefit the younger and the older generations and provide family support. Appropriate approaches and strategies for practice, research, and policy are listed above.

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## Play for Adults: Healing the Inner Child through Play

Reagan Fulton

### Introduction

In today's fast-paced society, people often disregard the essence and value of play in adult life. Its vital role in enhancing health and mental well-being is frequently overlooked in contemporary society and scientific research. This white paper underscores the importance of play beyond childhood, advocating for its necessity as a catalyst for adult vitality and creativity.

The sentiment ' **‘People do not cease playing because they grow old, but they grow old because they cease playing.’** (Hall, 1911, p. 566) though commonly misattributed to figures like George Bernard Shaw, traces back to G. Stanley Hall's 1911 sentiments in the "Journal of Education." It encapsulates the belief in the lifelong necessity of play for vitality and youthfulness. Over time, various intellectuals have echoed and rephrased this idea, emphasizing its universal acceptance and the enduring conviction in the crucial role of play in sustaining human vigor and resilience against aging.

This notion is a nostalgic reflection and a vital principle for adult health and well-being. Play is instrumental in reducing stress, fostering creativity, and enhancing emotional regulation—a perspective supported by Winnicott (1971), who emphasized that adult playfulness could counter negative aspects of life, such as stress and routine.

Integrating play into daily adult life, with strategies such as play therapy in mental health (Clifford et al., 2022), playful dynamics at work (West, 2017), and community play initiatives, can transform environments, fostering environments ripe for enhancing both personal and social development among adults. These approaches underscore the multi-dimensional benefits of play—spanning emotional, physical, and creative well-being—highlighted by recent studies that champion the inclusion of play as pivotal in adult life (Yarnal et al., 2008).

Embracing play as a cornerstone for adults can revolutionize societal norms, fostering creativity and sustaining mental health. This cultural shift, rooted in the principles highlighted by Hargreaves (2022), who emphasize play's essential role in creativity and cognitive flexibility, as well as the insights from Spielmann et al. (2023) pointing to play's capacity for bolstering emotional resilience, could pave the way for a future where joy and resilience not only coexist but flourish together. Moreover, such a transformation draws support from Farrow's (2021) critique on the undervaluation of play in adult life, stressing the need to recognize and harness its contribution to innovation and problem-solving. Collectively, this research underscores the array of benefits that play can provide when integrated into the fabric of adult life.

### **Problem Statement**

In contemporary society, the significance of play is often overshadowed and confined to childhood despite being crucial for cognitive, emotional, and social development. As adults enter a maze of obligations, societal and professional expectations dampen the vibrancy and acceptance of play, leading to a dwindling presence and perceived irrelevance in adult life. This oversight is a critical issue that demands attention, especially as adults face escalating stress, anxiety, and burnout due to overwhelming work cultures that prioritize over-engagement and dismiss leisure and play as frivolous (Spielmann, 2023).

The consequences of neglecting play in adulthood are profound, impacting individual well-being and societal health. Adults deprived of play exhibit higher stress levels. They are more susceptible to mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety, which can subsequently affect physical health due to chronic stress (Kemp et al., 2017). Societally, the undervaluation of adult play limits opportunities for social engagement and community building, which are essential for fostering empathy, bonding, and harmonious society (Farrow, 2021).

Systemically, the lack of play curtails workplace creativity and innovation, decreasing employee morale and job satisfaction and hindering collaboration, thereby stifling progress (Hargreaves, 2022). Recognizing the uninterrupted necessity of play

through adulthood is paramount for promoting holistic mental health and societal welfare.

This white paper advocates for strategic policy initiatives and a cultural shift to reframe adult play as a fundamental right essential for individual and societal well-being. Addressing barriers to play in modern lifestyles and proposing solutions to ensure the universal right to play is preserved across all ages is imperative (Clifford et al., 2022).

### **Background: The Enduring Importance of Play Across the Lifespan**

The enduring importance of play, transcending the confines of age and societal expectations, is a core theme highlighted throughout history and recent research findings. Pavlas et al. (2012) and Huizinga (2016) first established play as a vital aspect of individual development and cultural practices, noting its presence in the heart of ritualistic and communal activities. This view is supported by the profound work of Dr. Stuart Brown (Brown & Vaughn, 2010), who articulated that play acts as a fundamental catalyst for stress relief, cognitive agility, and emotional balance in adults, reinforcing its intrinsic value to the human condition at all life stages.

Recent studies reaffirm play's critical role in fostering creativity, psychological well-being, and problem-solving capabilities, challenging the misconception that its significance dwindles after childhood. Rene Proyer's (2014 a & 2014 b) and Bateson and Martin's (2013) work underline play's enduring relevance, advocating its benefits for innovation and adaptive behaviors in the face of adulthood's complexities.

Deepak Chopra (1994) eloquently ties the necessity of play to nurturing the 'inner child' within us, suggesting that a return to play can significantly alleviate the pressures of adult life, enriching both mind and spirit. This insight suggests that play fosters a sense of wonder and discovery and is essential for human fulfillment and resilience.

Understanding play's profound benefits to individual and community well-being invites a deeper appreciation for human nature. This perspective underscores the necessity of elevating play to a recognized and supported aspect of adult life beyond its traditional association with childhood. Such a reevaluation prompts a call to action for

society to safeguard the opportunity to play as a fundamental aspect of adulthood. By championing this cause, parents, educators, policymakers, and advocates play a crucial role in weaving play into the fabric of daily life, ensuring it remains a vibrant and essential expression of life at every age. This shift in perception and policy could pave the way for a more holistic approach to adult well-being, highlighting the importance of continuous play for fostering innovation, resilience, and a sense of fulfillment regardless of one's stage in life. This reflection compels society to recognize and legitimize play as a crucial element of adult life. It advocates a cultural shift that values and promotes the freedom to play at every age, highlighting it not as an optional luxury but as a nonnegotiable element of a thriving life.

### **Strategic Approaches for Embracing Play in Adult Environments**

In today's fast-paced society, integrating play into adult life is essential yet often overlooked. To navigate this challenge, several broad and adaptable strategies can create environments where play becomes a natural part of adult life, enhancing well-being, creativity, and social interactions.

#### **Fostering Playful Urban and Architectural Designs**

Community leaders and policymakers can champion the development of urban spaces designed to encourage play. This can include the creation of public parks, community gardens, and interactive installations that invite spontaneous play. Additionally, designing pedestrian-friendly pathways and incorporating vibrant, playful elements into cityscapes can stimulate engagement and relieve the monotony of daily routines (Laszloffy & Davis, (2019).

#### **Promoting Mixed-Use Community Spaces**

Combining functional spaces such as cafes and markets with recreational areas can transform everyday environments into dynamic hubs of activity. These spaces encourage relaxation and play, fostering ecological literacy and a deeper interaction with nature.

### **Supporting Community-Driven Initiatives**

Policymakers can endorse projects repurposing underused spaces into thriving community centers. By encouraging local involvement in designing these areas, communities can create spaces that reflect their unique needs and values, promoting a stronger connection among members through play.

### **Implementing Playful Infrastructure**

Integrating infrastructure that supports active lifestyles and playful interactions, like dedicated bike lanes and game-based landscapes, can enhance the quality of urban living. Such designs promote health, decrease stress, and increase social interaction by making play an accessible choice during daily commutes (Tonkin et al., 2019).

### **Incorporating Play in Corporate and Learning Environments**

Educational leaders and business managers can adopt playful learning and development strategies to foster innovation and problem-solving skills. Workshops encouraging divergent thinking and improvisation can nurture a culture of creativity and collaboration. Additionally, integrating game-based learning and playful team-building activities can enhance engagement and cooperation, ultimately supporting a more resilient and adaptive organizational culture (DreamStoneHR ,n.d.).

### **Encouraging Individual Engagement in Play**

Finally, recognizing the value of play on an individual level is crucial. Adults should be encouraged to regularly incorporate playful activities into their routines, exploring various interests that rouse their curiosity and joy. This personal commitment to play can improve mental health, social connections, and overall life satisfaction (Yarnal & Qian, 2011).

By adopting these approaches, communities and individuals can rekindle their engagement with the play, embedding it deeply into the fabric of everyday life. Such strategic shifts enhance personal well-being and cultivate vibrant, innovative, and connected communities.

## Recommendations

In a world that increasingly recognizes the significance of mental well-being and social connectivity, integrating play into the fabric of adult life emerges as a pivotal strategy. This section outlines a comprehensive set of practical recommendations for policymakers, community leaders, employers, educational bodies, and individuals to cultivate a culture that embraces and prioritizes play.

### For Communities & Policymakers:

- **Strategic Urban Planning:** Prioritize the inclusion of public parks, community gardens, and pedestrian zones in urban development plans to facilitate accessible leisure and social interaction opportunities
- **Incorporate Playful Design Elements:** Infuse public spaces with interactive installations, colorful pathways, and engaging artistic elements to encourage spontaneous play and exploration.
- **Promote Mixed-Use Spaces:** Encourage the development of versatile areas that integrate leisure and community services, fostering lively, interactive communities.
- **Support Community Projects:** Invest in transforming underutilized spaces into vibrant hubs for community engagement and playful activities.
- **Enhance Playful Infrastructure:** Develop infrastructure supportive of active lifestyles, such as expansive bike lanes and pedestrian-friendly zones, to encourage daily play and movement.

### For Employers and Organizational Leaders:

- **Foster Playful Work Environments:** To inspire innovation, create spaces that encourage creativity and leisure, such as relaxation nooks or game rooms.
- **Implement Game-Based Team Building:** Utilize playful activities and games to enhance team cohesion, alleviate stress, and foster a supportive, positive workplace culture.

- **Personalize Work Spaces:** Encourage employees to customize their work environments with playful and personal elements to boost happiness and job satisfaction.

#### **For Educational Leaders & Organizations:**

- **Innovate with Playful Learning:** Embed game-based learning and creative methodologies within educational and professional development settings to enhance engagement, problem-solving, and divergent thinking (Papangelis et al., 2020).
- **Facilitate Workshops for Creativity:** Conduct improvisational and creative thinking workshops, promoting resilience and innovative problem-solving skills.

#### **For Individuals:**

- **Embrace and Schedule Play:** Dedicate time to consistently engaging in activities that bring joy, whether through sports, the arts, or simple leisure activities.
- **Explore Diverse Forms of Play:** Discover and indulge in playful activities that resonate with personal interests, enhancing life quality and happiness.
- **Acknowledge Play's Importance:** Recognize and advocate for the essential role of play in creating a balanced, enriched adult life, contributing to personal health and societal vitality.

#### **Transforming Home and Community Environments:**

- **Cultivate Playful Spaces at Home:** Design specific areas or zones dedicated to relaxation and play, encouraging creativity and decompression (Tonkin et al., 2019).
- **Advocate for Play in the Community:** Engage in or initiate community events centered around play to foster social connections and a sense of belonging (Heljakka & Blomberg, 2022).

By adopting these strategic recommendations, every sector of society can contribute to fostering an environment where play is recognized not as a luxury but as a necessity for holistic adult development. These guidelines aim to revolutionize how we perceive, integrate, and engage with play across various dimensions of our adult lives, from our work environments to our communities and personal spaces. The collective effort to prioritize play promises to cultivate more vibrant, resilient, and interconnected communities, enhancing individual well-being and societal health.

## **Conclusion**

Integrating play into adult life is more than a nostalgic nod to childhood; it is a strategic endeavor with far-reaching benefits for health, mental well-being, and communal vibrancy. The importance of play, often overshadowed in a rapidly evolving society, emerges as a critical element in fostering creativity and vitality among adults. By re-evaluating urban spaces, work environments, and educational methodologies, we can transform age-old perceptions and enhance the quality of adult life on several fronts.

When communities prioritize parks and interactive public installations, employers facilitate playful work environments, and educators incorporate game-based learning, they create ecosystems that foster social connectivity and innovative thinking. Such environments break the monotony of adult responsibilities and reinforce the foundation for mental health and societal well-being.

The shift towards integrating play is not merely about adding value to individual lives but about cultivating resilient, agile communities equipped to face the challenges of tomorrow. Through these collective efforts, play becomes a vibrant thread woven into the fabric of daily life, essential for renewal and growth in our personal and professional spheres. Thus, acknowledging and embracing the role of play is pivotal in sculpting a society that values well-being and happiness, ensuring that we never outgrow the joy of playing, even as adults.



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## Play in Hospitals

Stephanie Kuntz and Myae Han

### **Problem statement – Issues**

Physical illness and hospitalization can significantly impact children's normal development and play experience (D'Antonio, 1984). Hospitalization can be considered an experience of anti-childhood, in which the child is isolated from their usual surroundings, faces non-normative challenges, and experiences regular discomfort, pain, stress, and anxiety (Haiat et al., 2003). Play can serve as a tool for reducing hospitalized children's anxiety levels, buffering stress, and aiding in their recovery process. Play provides positive benefits physically and psychologically. For children, play can also be utilized as a tool to promote parent-child attachment relationships, especially when children are separated from their familiar home environment.

All children, including hospitalized children with illness or disabilities, deserve the right to play and opportunities to participate in play, regardless of the additional barriers they may face in accessing play (Children's Healthcare Australasia & Association for the Well-being of Children in Healthcare, n.d.; International Play Association, 2015; United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Researchers identified multiple challenges to implementing play in the hospital setting, such as lack of policy promoting play, poor healthcare attitudes toward play, inappropriate staff-to-patient ratios, focus on survival, and lack of staff motivation to support play (Singh et al., 2019).

We propose an alternative strategy for supporting resilience in hospitalized children through high-quality parent-child interactions through play.

### **Background**

#### ***Play as a Source of Resilience***

The hospitalized child is still a child (Haiat et al., 2003). A disability or illness does not negate a child's inherent right to play or receive nurturance and support from family in healthcare settings. Many medical settings have adopted a family-centered care model, which recognizes the importance of the family unit in individual

development, decreases child stress, shortens hospital stays, and allows for more parental involvement (Stubbs, 2018). Play is often a therapeutic tool for hospitalized children (D'Antonio, 1984).

The importance of play and secure attachment in promoting optimal child development is well documented (Land, 2018). Play and secure attachment relationships are sources of resilience, yet challenges are faced when supporting these sources of resilience in the hospitalized child.

### **The Benefits of Play in Healthcare Settings.**

Play is essential to development because it contributes to children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being (Ginsburg & Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2007). Play provides the child with opportunities to master themselves and the environment, test reality, express needs, deal with fears, and gain pleasure. Play allows children to master specific anxieties that are difficult or cannot be resolved realistically, fulfill wishes, and transform passivity into activity (D'Antonio, 1984). Play is extremely useful for hospitalized children, providing them with opportunities they may not otherwise receive.

Additionally, play can be helpful for practitioners when seeking the child's cooperation for threatening treatments and procedures (D'Antonio, 1984). Play reduces tension, anger, frustration, conflict, anxiety, and loss of control (Haiat et al., 2003). Play also allows parents to witness their child experiencing enjoyment, which can alleviate their fears and help them cope better with the situation. Play allows parents to have fun with their children, be emotionally close, and experience joy in stressful situations (Haiat et al., 2003). Play helps maintain a sense of normalization for children facing non-normative circumstances and has extensive therapeutic benefits (Koukourikos et al., 2015).

Within the medical setting, child life specialists address the psychosocial needs of children and their families using empirically supported strategies, often through play

(Claridge et al., 2020). For instance, patients who received more intensive child life services in one study were less likely to report distress, and those who received any child life services experienced less anxiety (Claridge et al., 2020).

### **Challenges to Play**

Physical illness and hospitalization can significantly impact the play experience (D'Antonio, 1984). An immobilized child cannot independently explore their environment, but these experiences and enriching activities can be brought to them at the bedside (D'Antonio, 1984; Haiat et al., 2003). For example, in music therapy for the hospitalized child, activities are adjusted to focus on what the child can do, and sessions are tailored to the child's interests (Ayson, 2008). An absence of policy that promotes play, poor healthcare attitudes toward play, and inappropriate staff-to-patient ratios limit buy-in for more play. Instead, the focus on survival and the lack of staff motivation to support play are barriers to effectively implementing play in the hospital setting (Singh et al., 2019).

### **Appropriate Approaches/Strategies**

Play benefits all children, and every child deserves the right to play, including hospitalized children ( International Play Association, 2015; United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Play is instrumental in promoting resilience in all children (Housman, 2020). Using play with hospitalized children and their families, we propose integrating these resilience-building factors with promoting secure attachment relationships and therapeutic support in the healthcare setting.

### **Integrating Play to Promote Secure Attachment in Healthcare Setting**

Integrating play into the hospital setting provides opportunities for strengthening attachment. Attachment describes the reciprocal, loving, emotional bond which connects two individuals. This bond, achieved through a developmental process in the early years of life, allows individuals to develop internal working models of attachment based on these early relationships. These early relationships influence later relationships (Ainsworth, 1985; 1989; Bowlby, 1982). For a child to develop a secure

attachment with their primary caregiver, the primary caregiver must be available and responsive to their needs. Secure attachment requires caregiver responsiveness, psychological accessibility, acceptance, and cooperation. When the child is distressed, quality face-to-face interactions and close affectionate contact are necessary (Stovall & Dozier, 1998). These nurturing, supportive relationships serve as a protective factor against adversity (Gilligan, 2004).

The benefits of play and secure relationships can be capitalized through the attachment theory lens to promote dyadic interactions between parents and hospitalized children to support their resilience through attachment.

Play opportunities provide an avenue to support positive, nurturing parent-child relationships, which supports the child's developmental trajectories and helps prevent maladaptive outcomes (Turner, 2005). Parents may need additional support in providing these nurturing experiences to children; however, by learning these skills, parents can continue to engage in positive interactions after the practitioner leaves the room (Johnson et al., 2005). The best way to engage in positive interaction with children is through play such as music play, sensory play, arts and crafts, storytelling, board games, etc.

### **An Example: Music Play as a Therapy**

Music play for hospitalized children is one intervention to support attachment as a therapeutic tool (Stubbs, 2018). Parents across cultures have used music, such as lullabies, for generations to soothe, comfort, and relax upset children and strengthen attachment bonds. Music can help parents and children perceive closeness and unity and develop strong, enduring emotional ties needed for secure attachment (Stubbs, 2018).

Ayson (2008) explored how parents, staff, and therapists perceived the impacts of short-term music play therapy for hospitalized children. Music play therapy was beneficial to children by providing channels for their emotional expression, decreasing anxiety, providing opportunities for choice and control, providing distraction during

procedures, providing opportunities for mastery and success, and providing opportunities for fun and enjoyment (Ayson, 2008).

When actively involved in music play therapy sessions, parents felt less anxiety, more relaxation, and positive changes in their mood. Staff felt parents benefited from seeing their child happy and having fun. Staff also utilized the sessions to support parental learning, as they modeled ways parents can calm or distract the child after the session. Many positive parent-child interactions were observed when parents participated in music play therapy. The music play therapy sessions provided parents a non-threatening or non-judgmental environment to interact with their child. These positive interactions helped them engage and interact with their child. These meaningful interactions are vital for developing parent-child relationships and thus building resilience needed for recovery in healthcare settings (Ayson, 2008).

### ***Recommendations for Practitioners***

Play activities should be incorporated in healthcare settings. Medical-themed pretend play can help the child understand their environment. Art can serve as an avenue for communicating complex emotions children are not ready to verbalize. Collaborative games help develop cooperative relationships. These experiences help reduce stress and promote physical, social, and cognitive development (D'Antonio, 1984). Medical professionals are positioned to support the family functioning of their patients facing adverse circumstances, which benefits patient outcomes (Lutz et al., 2009). Recommendations for practitioners to promote parent-child interactions through play in healthcare settings include:

**1) Engage parents in daily routines and rituals with playfulness.** Parents have communicated the desire for "normalcy" when parenting a chronically ill child (Anderson et al., 2010). Practitioners can support parents in engaging in "normal" routines in non-normative situations. Daily routines such as bedtime stories, eating meals together, and bath time can give families a sense of normalcy. Infuse playfulness into regular routines and rituals to instill a sense of positivity in hospitalized children and their parents. Practitioners also need to consider cultural practices relevant to the family's daily routine. Daily routines with playfulness can provide a sense of order and



structure in chaotic times and be more therapeutic in helping children recover from stress (Gilligan, 2004).

**2) Provide special celebratory play for family engagement.** Supporting families in celebrating meaningful holidays and special occasions can also contribute to positive interactions and resilience. According to Brain Sutton-Smith, a well-known play theorist, celebrations and festivals are important forms of play in our culture (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Practitioners may support families in celebrating birthdays, treatment milestones, or other culturally relevant experiences. These special celebrations can be adapted to the child and family's needs while accommodating safety procedures. For example, a child celebrating their birthday or treatment milestones may have battery-operated birthday candles as an open flame is a fire hazard. The cake can be made to accommodate the child's dietary needs. If the child cannot have food or drink, they may make a cake from playdoh or craft materials.

**3) Model attuned interactions.** Staff can support parental learning by modeling positive interactions with the child. Staff can model strategies to calm or distract the child so that parents can implement these strategies after the practitioner leaves (Ayson, 2008).

**4) Notice positive interactions.** Practitioners can acknowledge and praise positive and playful parent-child interactions they observe. Specifically, they may see eye contact, comforting touches, smiles, laughter, and consistent caregiving interaction (Turner, 2005). Acknowledgement helps parents to recognize their positive behaviors and how they are beneficial to the child, encouraging them to continue these behaviors. For example, a practitioner may say, "I noticed you were stroking your child's hair and singing softly during the blood draw. That seemed to calm him down. You are a very comforting presence for him." Practitioners should be able to identify and label positive interactions, which would require skill and training in understanding parent-child attachment (Letourneau et al., 2005).

**5) Give space for parents to play with their child.** Provide a physical space for parents to engage in play with their child. The space should be non-threatening, non-judgmental, and safe. These spaces can include blocks and dolls that allow children to use their imagination (Ginsburg & Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of

Child and Family Health, 2007). Many hospitals have activity rooms intentionally designed to support play (Turner, 2005). Practitioners should encourage parents to utilize these spaces with their children. If the child cannot go to this space, materials, and equipment can be brought to the bedside to support parent-child interaction opportunities.

**6) Reduce stressors parents face so they can attend to their child.** Having a hospitalized child places excessive stress and responsibilities on parents. These responsibilities leave parents less time and cognitive capacities for parenting (Pinquart, 2013). Feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and other stressors may lead parents to withdraw from their child. This lack of emotional availability decreases the parent's ability to act as a secure base and source of comfort for the child (Stubbs, 2018). Practitioners should connect parents with resources, interventions, therapies, organizations, and advocacy groups that may alleviate some of these stressors when feasible. Also, encourage them to take time to reduce their stressors, such as social interactions with their friends or relatives.

### **Conclusion/Recommendations**

Play can be a powerful tool to restore the resilience of hospitalized children and their families. Play is the mechanism by which positive parent-child interactions can be promoted in the hospitalized child. Therapeutic interventions do not always need to be clinical. Ordinary routines and rituals infused with play and playfulness can be excellent sources of resilience for children (Gilligan, 2004). Sensitive, responsive, and consistent, playful interactions with parents can protect children from adverse outcomes in the face of hospitalization and promote a healing modality to improve child outcomes (Turner, 2005).

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## Nature Is Essential

- [Nature Play: Early Childhood and Beyond](#)
- [The Joy of Nature-Based Teaching in Duluth, Minnesota](#)
- [Playing in Nature](#)
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- [Equitable Access to Nature-Based Play Through Public Policy](#)



## Nature Play: Early Childhood and Beyond

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*Experience, a serial course of affairs with their own characteristic properties and relationships, occurs, happens, and is what it is. – John Dewey in Experience and Nature, 1929, p. 232.*

### Introduction

#### Defining Nature Play

Differing visions of what constitutes nature – wilderness, patches of grass, gardens, animals, oceans, or all living and non-living things – add to the conundrum of defining nature play (Wilson, 2018). However, play in nature invites children of all ages to observe the natural world, fostering curiosity, exercising agency, and nurturing deep connections. Research also supports the developmental and educational benefits of nature immersion (Mann et al., 2022), but the scope of nature play remains ambiguous and elusive (Burghardt, 2010; Sutton-Smith, 2001). Yet, children's play, defined by Huizinga (1955), Vygotsky (1978), or Rubin et al. (1983) as being freely chosen, self-directed, creative, absorbing, and divergent, is undoubtedly evident in nature.

MacDonald et al. (2023) assert that nature play does, indeed, include all the attributes listed above but emphasize how natural elements influence children's play. Play in nature, for example, is more complex, physical, imaginative, creative, sensorial, and often riskier than indoor play (Frost et al., 2012; Gill, 2014). It is a personal and phenomenological experience that can be shared with others, but one that calls for *epoché*, or suspending judgment about what is observed (Husserl, 2017/1931). This paper only reflects a small body of work on nature play, highlighting the importance of play for healthy development.

From an evolutionary perspective, the independent activity, personal responsibility, problem-solving, and self-initiated explorations inherent in nature play are essential to children's development. Children's risk for anxiety and depression is elevated without



these types of resilience-supporting play opportunities (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Gray et al., 2023). Pointedly, Louv's (2005; 2008) caution against "nature deficit disorder" as a metaphor for the generational decrease in children's outdoor play sparked grassroots efforts to re-connect children with nature. Moreover, Dickinson (2013) suggests adults rethink human-nature disconnections, particularly romanticized notions of their childhoods, to focus instead on reconciling our cultural estrangements from nature, creating a sense of place and a personal understanding of what "nature" means.

### **Importance of Play in Nature**

Systematic literature reviews affirm that the natural world presents play opportunities with cognitive, social, creative, physical, emotional, and biophilic benefits (Johnstone et al., 2022; Mann et al., 2022). Research also suggests that play in nature enhances spatial working memory (Torquati et al., 2017), cultivates executive functions (Carr et al., 2017; Ernst & Burcak, 2019), underpins early science learning (Gomes & Fleer, 2020), and fosters environmental identities and stewardship (DeVilje et al., 2021).

Grounded in evidence for positive developmental, environmental, and educational outcomes (Burgess & Ernst, 2020; Bruner et al., 1976; Chawla, 2015), nature-based early learning programs have grown by 300% since 2010; 200% since 2017 (NAAEE, 2023). High-level nature-based pedagogies are transformative; teachers view children as agentic and engage in co-discovery of environmental phenomena (Kochanowski et al., in press). From an Indigenous perspective, reverence and gratitude toward the natural world encourage us to embrace our collective connectedness to and responsibility for the natural world, cultivating symbiotic relationships (Kimmerer, 2020). These modalities have been adopted by advocates for early childhood education for sustainability (Davis et al., in press). They are most evident in nature preschools where children spend most, if not all, of the school day outdoors.

## **Nature's Affordances**

Play in nature-rich environments may be best described as boundless, with actualized environmental affordances being ones an individual perceives, uses, or influences (Gibson, 1986; Heft, 1988; Kytta, 2004). Additionally, myriad loose parts in nature promote creativity and discovery (Nicholson, 1971). They afford numerous opportunities for play as defined by eminent play scholars (Hughes, 2012; Piaget, 1962; Sutton-Smith, 2001) and flexibility within the environment and the child (Brown & Patte, 2013). Thus, children actualize the affordances in nature through exploration and play (Storli et al., 2020), with the flora, fauna, and geography in nature offering exceptional play affordances, subject only to a child's imagination.

## **Natural Play Environments**

The natural affordances of wilderness, backyards, gardens, parks, and other green spaces certainly invite nature play. Additionally, landscape architects employ biophilic design to create outdoor nature playgrounds or playscapes for children (Moore & Marcus, 2008). Nature playscapes, living systems that demonstrate seasonal change and regeneration due to natural events and children's impacts, present possibilities to learn with and from the local ecology (Moore, 2014). They embody a sense of place with features that elicit multisensory, unique, and personal experiences (Carr & Luken, 2014; Elliott, 2008). Reflecting local biodiversity, nature-rich playscapes should be designed for divergent use, where materials are touched, manipulated, moved, picked, climbed, etc., by children as they choose, with opportunities for risk-taking, spontaneity, and discovery (Luken et al., 2011). Circuitous playscape paths orient children, providing geographical referents and access to "secret" spots and gathering spaces for play. Importantly, playscapes (and green schoolyards) in education programs and childcare centers may provide equitable access to nature play for many children who otherwise may not have access.

## **Nature Play Typology**

Descriptions of what happens during nature play, wherever it occurs, may be framed

through several play typologies, such as the taxonomy used by the United Kingdom's playworkers (Hughes, 2002). However, Loebach and Cox's (2020) typology for children's nature play behaviors specifically focuses on outdoor environments where children's play differs from indoor play in its intricacy, physicality, and variability (Frost et al., 2012). They developed their typology based on an iterative behavior-mapping process originally aligned with Rubin's (2008)

*Play Observation Scale*, a systematic literature review of play and development, and a synthesis of the current research on nature play. It includes nine play types: *physical, exploratory, imaginative, play with rules, bio play, expressive play, restorative play, digital play, and non-play.*

Multiple play types are often evident in any scenario. Play snippets observed within our research and practice at the Arlitt Child Development Center, the University of Cincinnati's economically and culturally diverse laboratory preschool, are shared below to illustrate children's nature play using Loebach & Cox's (2020) typology. Preschoolers interact with nature throughout the urban campus and at the Arlitt Nature Playscape. They can access tools, buckets, shovels, water, natural loose parts, and resting spaces. They also use digital microscopes, magnifying glasses, and binoculars. Digging in sand, soil, or pebbles is common in nature play, while sticks, stones, water, or mud are included in many play themes. Children at the center are supervised by adults with varying levels of play partnering or interference.

### **Play Snippets.**

***Treasure Hunt.** Five boys were deeply engaged in an ongoing game of pirate treasure hunting that spanned five weeks. On each playscape visit, the game began anew. They sought clues, primarily stones. Before each search, a "reader," holding a rock in his hands, described the clue to be found. A large log (treasure chest) was lugged up a hill to the circular fort, comprised of vertically embedded 3-4 foot logs, where all treasures were stored. The boys made it clear to adults, "No grown-ups allowed!"*

This play snippet demonstrates an extended game involving rule play. There were clear procedures for seeking clues dictated by the designated clue reader. Physical play was evident: the children ran, collaborated to lift heavy logs, and climbed a hill up to their fort. The play was dramatic and imaginative - pirates on a treasure hunt. Rocks were clues, sticks were swords, and logs were treasure chests.

***Artistic Pentad Structure.*** *Using long sticks, bamboo, leaves, and other embellishments found in the playscape, children built an intricate pentad structure (envision a tripod, but with five legs) atop a 4-foot square wooden platform. Through trial and error, the children wove and balanced the sticks so they stood, balanced upon one another. They inserted a horizontal stick through a vine near the top.*

Notable about this snippet of construction and expressive play was the extended time the children spent engaged in play and focused on their project. Numerous examples of children using sliced tree trunks, or "tree cookies," as blocks, stacking logs for a campfire, or mixing materials to create ephemeral art are often observed in the playscape.

***Ant Log.*** *Three girls jointly rolled over a partly decaying, damp log after feeling a patch of soft moss on the side of the log. They noticed a millipede that curled up and released gas when the log was moved. "Ewww!" An active ant colony captured their attention, particularly the ant workers picking up round, white things. "They're grabbing the eggs!" (larvae and pupae). The girls bent their heads over the log and watched the ants. After several minutes, they rolled the log back.*

***Planting and "Pollening."*** *A three-year-old girl was squatted, digging in the garden area of the playscape. She laid a spindly flower with dangling roots next to her. She picked it up after making a small hole in the soil with her shovel and held it for a moment before inserting the flower end into the soil. After a few seconds, she inverted it, putting the roots in the hole, then patted the soil around*

*it with her fingers. At that moment, two other girls skipped by, one saying to the other, "And the bees were pollening the flowers."*

These two observed examples of bio play are fundamental attributes of play in nature. Sensory exploration often leads to bio-play and children's discovery. These snippets also indicate that children begin understanding ecological phenomena through both play and socially transmitted knowledge.

### **Supporting Children's Nature Play**

Nature play supports children's autonomy and agency, but independent play has attenuated – primarily due to societal shifts in place, materials, and time (Chudacoff, 2007). Children increasingly play in a world that adults construct for them with highly valued toys and little unstructured time. Constant parental monitoring has created a "paradox of constrained well-being" (Dinsmore & Pugh, 2021, p. 448), but, as Hughes (2012) notes " ... if the activity is bounded by adult rules, if it is stiff, formalised and dominated by the need to score points and flatter one's ego, that is not play, it is something else" (p. 325).

Nurturing children's nature play by helping them settle into play, joining when invited, and stepping back once Support is not needed may steer children toward more independent play. Interpreting nature for young children through sensorial explorations, stories, and guided discovery highlights affordances for unstructured play. This may also increase a culture of play that is considerate of natural phenomena, embracing connectedness to and our responsibility for the ecosphere. The vignette below highlights how an adult makes space for children's nature play without imposing unnecessary rules or structure.

***Let's Make Potions.*** *With a pink bucket in hand, a child said to me (Claire), "let's make potions." I said, "What a great idea! I wonder what you will put in your potion?" We looked around together. She collected rocks, leaves, branches, dirt, and other natural materials she found in the playscape. Other children noticed and asked to join in.*

*"Can I make a potion?" One child asked.*

*"No! This is my bucket," She responded.*

*"How about you go find a bucket and you can make your own potion," I offered.*

*Soon, a group of four children were busily making potions. I stepped back, sat, and watched as they searched for items to add. Every so often, a child walked over to show me their potion. I would ask them to tell me about their potion.*

*Children described where they found things, identified their favorite items and lifted items to show me what was hidden underneath. They wove in and out of the potion play, and some moved on to other play scenarios as new children entered the play (with a bucket). They lifted buckets to "drink" and commented on transforming into witches and princesses.*

*I noticed a boy picking leaves off a bush. I slowly walked over, knelt, and said, "Wow, look at what you have in your potion. I noticed you are picking leaves from this bush - this bush is still alive! Its leaves have a job to do, and they are still growing. But look, I bet we can find leaves that have already fallen."*

*He looked at me, seemingly confused and unconvinced. A girl standing next to him said, "He got to pick from the bush; why don't I get to?"*

*"Well," I said, "he didn't know that we shouldn't pick from the bush. That's ok, we're all learning. And I know there are many other cool leaves, rocks, and twigs that you can find for your potions!"*

In this vignette, several types of play were observed. It was exploratory; children used natural objects they found on the playscape to create something new – a potion. Children engaged in imaginative play as they "drank" their potions; their hair "turned colors" as they transformed into witches or princesses. I also nudged the children towards bio play, encouraging them to gather natural elements that have already fallen rather than picking directly from the bushes and trees.

## Nature Play Throughout the Lifespan

Childhood experiences of nature clearly create bonds with the natural environment (Hinds & Spark, 2011). In *Making Nature Personal*, O'Connor (2013) describes how children who were actively engaged in nature center activities when young disappear in their youth, only to return as adults. How about we encourage nature play throughout our lives?

- *Uplift the importance of unstructured nature play.* Play is too often relegated to early childhood, yet it is important across the lifespan. We must normalize and affirm that children of all ages in all places have the right to play – with space and opportunity to exercise agency, curiosity, imagination, risk-taking, and executive functions.
- *Cultivate our own connection to nature.* Nature inspires recreation, environmentalism, hobbies (such as gardening), and spiritual connections. We nurture and model our connectedness for children and our wider communities through respectful engagement within the natural world. Play need not be contained to childhood.
- *Make time for nature play.* Encourage children to go outdoors to play without unnecessary adult constraints. Find or create nature-rich environments replete with natural loose parts that are flexible and engaging. Experience nature play alongside children and youth in all kinds of weather; it encourages new perspectives.
- *Support and encourage adolescents to explore the outdoors.* Encourage adolescents to disconnect from technology and spend time outdoors—in a nature-rich setting rather than a sports field. Spend time in nature as a family. Advocate for the greening of schoolyards, recess, environmental education, and nature camps.

## Conclusion

Nature play and experiences in and with nature are unique to each person. A salient

point about playing outdoors is that an omnipresent affinity for living things that binds us to nature, or biophilia, generates positive feelings (Wilson, 1984), but for some, nature, such as perceived threats within a dense wilderness, can also evoke biophobia (Olivas-Jara et al., 2020). Yet, when we are open to experiencing nature ourselves and inviting children to play in nature, we access a world of possibility, connection, and play that, as Dewey (1929) posits, is what it is.

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## The Joy of Nature-Based Teaching in Duluth, Minnesota

Christina Wild

Public school teachers across the United States face high burnout and attrition, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and challenging work conditions. In Duluth, Minnesota, a city known for appreciating the outdoors, nature-based education (NBE) and outdoor play have emerged as potential solutions to address these issues.

In previous research (see Ernst, 2007; Ardoin & Bowers, 2020), the benefits of NBE for students have been well-documented. However, this researcher looked at the impact of NBE on educators. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of nature-based educators in Duluth is one step toward addressing teacher burnout and retention challenges using NBE.

Nature-based Education (NBE) encompasses various pedagogical approaches rooted in outdoor experiences and environmental stewardship. Despite its growing popularity, particularly among early childhood educators, its impact on teacher outcomes still needs to be explored. Research suggests that NBE can contribute to positive teacher outcomes, including job satisfaction and retention. However, there is a need for a more in-depth exploration of the experiences of nature-based educators, particularly in communities like Duluth, where outdoor culture is prominent.

### Background

Rachel, a nature-based preschool teacher in Duluth, says, "When you think of Duluth, Minnesota, you think, wow, like, this is the spot where people appreciate and respect and understand the outdoors, and being active and kind of leading our families to respect and honor this Indigenous land that we are so fortunate to set foot on." Rachel teaches at one of Duluth's twelve nature-based preschools, kindergartens, and programs with outdoor components. Despite the many winter months, Duluth schools value the local community as part of the school culture, including taking children outdoors. Therefore, the concentration of nature-based programming in Duluth is special.

Duluth schools are part of a growing culture that embraces NBE, where students engage with their community, situating their educational experiences in local and familiar contexts. Dale et al. (2020) suggest that the naturalness and novelty of the setting, nature-based education, and spending more time outside positively correlated with positive student outcomes. Moreover, immersing students in their community interconnects academics, the environment, citizenship, and social justice. The benefits of NBE for children are known, but what about educators?

According to Ernst (2007), a growing body of evidence supports the relevance of environmental and nature-based education to formal education, including positive student academic outcomes. Ernst has spearheaded research into nature-based education in Duluth and has worked closely with the Duluth Nature Play Collaborative. As part of her work, Ernst has undergraduate education students observe other teachers in their outdoor classrooms. The connection of teachers to natural and social places influences their instructional choices. In addition, NBE affects professional decisions to remain in education. Teachers perceiving better working conditions show a decreased likelihood of intending to move or leave (Grant et al., 2019, p. 305). The Natural Start Alliance, a network and organization for early childhood environmental education, says that nature-based preschool programs have grown twenty-five-fold over the past decade and now number over six hundred (Merrick, 2021).

Public school teachers are burning out and leaving the profession (Christian-Brandt et al., 2020). The results of Pyhältö et al. (2021) revealed that nearly half the teachers in a sample demonstrated an indicative risk of burnout (p. 234). The COVID-19 pandemic and its after-effects have added to the demands of an already challenging profession. Much has been written about the "disconnection between children's lived experience and school learning" (see Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2013) and subsequent efforts to foster NBE. The general problem is that despite research into the effects of NBE on students, the impacts of NBE on teachers have yet to be explored. So, what do nature-based educators get out of teaching this way? Moreover, what are the experiences of nature-based educators? With its concentration of NBE programs, Duluth provided a robust sample population of teachers for this inquiry.



## **Approaches to Nature-Based Education**

### **Getting into Nature-Based Education**

This researcher asked the study participants how they came to be teachers. Most of the teachers did not initially consider education as a career option. However, many study participants had positive outdoor experiences as young people. The teachers described trips to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, working as camp counselors, and spending time playing outside. When the study participants became teachers, those foundational outdoor experiences had become a passion for getting outside. Moreover, that, in turn, leads to sharing that with students.

### **Staying in Duluth**

I questioned study participants on how they landed in Duluth. I anticipated many teachers would be native to Duluth or from the Midwest. Therefore, it was unsurprising to hear from participants that they wanted to stay here and sought returns to the city after moving away. A few came here later in life from other places but now do not intend to leave. Duluth firmly holds its residents, and the city's people are full of pride. Walking around the city, you notice the frequency of people wearing clothing items relating to Duluth and its businesses. Also, organizations like the Duluth Nature Play Collaborative and the Duluth Area Outdoor Alliance have high levels of activity and participation from teachers. The New York Times noted that Duluth welcomes newcomers with "widespread politeness and friendliness" when profiling the city for its role as a climate change haven (Kamin, 2023). As study participant Rachel said, "Our family loves Duluth. This is home."

### **Staying in Teaching**

After reviewing the literature on teacher retention, participants were asked what it has been like to practice nature-based education and what keeps them interested. Unsurprisingly, 15 out of 16 study participants will stay in teaching. The single word that kept appearing was "joy": whether participants used the term—"We get to experience newness all the time. And wonder. And joy"—or it was written on their faces. The people indigenous to Duluth are the Ojibwe, whose word for joy is *minwendam*. *Minwendam* comes from *mino*, which is "good," and *endam*, which is "to think." Therefore,

minwendam means to have thoughts in balance. Lucy, a study participant who has been running a nature-based preschool for a decade, commented that she wants to practice nature-based education because she gets to see children as their "fullest young selves." As Lucy talked, you could see how she was experiencing teaching at its fullest.

Teachers in the study wanted to show me their outdoor spaces and were proud of the work that they were doing. Frequent descriptors written by the researcher included "joyful description of their outdoor space." The participants in this study said things like "I am so grateful every day" or "I can't see myself doing anything else." Nature-based education is sustaining them in a profession that, for so many, is not sustainable.

### **Leaving Teaching**

One teacher noted, "It's not all rays of sunshine and rainbows." Teaching has become increasingly more challenging in the last few years. The COVID-19 pandemic isolated children and exposed them to a lot of screen time. Lucy remarked that even in an outdoor program, there is still a lot of structure and that it has been hard to teach kids who have not been in any structured setting for the last few years. Lucy also brought up how children are spending more time on devices. Children are looking to screens to self-soothe and provide entertainment. Time spent on screens seems to be affecting children's sleep and imagination. However, nature-based education provides ample opportunities for creativity and exercise, leading to sleep. The study participants cited physical activity and movement as a benefit of nature-based education but also a concern.

There were concerns on the personal level: Six study participants talked about the physical demands of nature-based education. Lucy had knee surgery, and it was a wake-up call for whether her body could keep up with her students. Another participant, Luke, expressed concerns for some of the older members of his teaching staff and the toll that nature-based education is taking on their bodies. Even younger teachers said the work is "physically tiring." Nature-based teaching can be emotionally draining, too.

One of the teachers in the study, Erin, left teaching. Her interview was less about her nature-based teaching practice and more about holding space for the difficulties she has endured over the last few years. First, there were all the challenges around

teaching in a pandemic. Then, Erin had an administrator try to move her to another grade level against her wishes and teaching expertise. Finally, Erin ended up at another school where she found students with higher needs. She has reached retirement age and feels ready to take on less stress. Lack of autonomy or administrative support pushes some other teachers closer to leaving teaching.

Edinger and Edinger (2018) said that teachers need to feel valued. Even in Duluth, teachers do not always feel valued. Carla came "very close" to leaving this year when her school's principal tried to limit her class's outdoor time. Carla confronted the principal with research and evidence of her student's academic and behavioral successes. Additionally, Carla threatened to quit if she continued to be "micromanaged." Gui (2019) found that teachers are less likely to leave the teaching profession based on the principal's or other administrators' attitudes, actions, and practices (p. 116). At the school level, Carla needed a principal who would create an environment for her to flourish (Gui, 2019).

Kelly talked about "considering moving down to the cities" because even though she doesn't want to leave teaching outside, the "school atmosphere has not been great." If either Carla or Kelly did leave teaching, it would be unusual for Duluth. Reggie, a school administrator, was asked about attrition, and he said Duluth does not usually lose teachers because pay and benefits are good. Duluth's retention points to research conducted by Ingersoll and May (2012), which found that working conditions and leadership actions result in less turnover. Even though Erin will leave this year, she still plans to actively support outdoor education and experiences for Duluth's young people. Erin's attitude indicates the deep bond people feel with Duluth. Still, as much as a teacher may love NBE, they should be fairly compensated for their work.

A few study participants mentioned their jobs' financial realities: they are not paid very much. García and Weiss (2020) pointed to the relatively low pay teachers receive as a reason for turnover. Hannah said this is "heart work," but if she chooses to have a family or buy a house, she must make money-based decisions.

## **Push and Pull**

Rinke and Mawhinney (2017) give the idea that teachers are pushed and pulled *into* teaching, pushed and pulled *out of* education, and pushed and pulled *around* their passions: an assertion that evokes some powerful imagery for anyone who has been in the education field. This study asked how people became teachers, but by asking how teaching has been and what the future holds, the participants addressed a more profound question: Why be an educator? Looking back over my research notes and transcripts, I can say that participants are experiencing fulfillment, their calling, and finding meaning and purpose in life. We know schools have problems. However, NBE presents options for recruitment into teaching and standing in the community. NBE is value-added and not for everyone or every community. Still, it offers opportunities for homeschooling and co-ops and a way of diversifying the teaching pool by bringing in outdoor education teachers or giving people strong reasons to stay by welcoming their passions for the outdoors. Also, "outdoorsiness" may be part of Duluth's brand and the culture of the educators here, but similar places like Alaska or Colorado exist. Teacher retention has no one-size-fits-all solution, and each school community must work purposefully to devise plans to retain teachers. NBE may be part of the plan of school leaders to retain teachers amidst the growing problems of burnout and stress.

Toropova et al. (2021) contend that satisfied teachers are less susceptible to stress and burnout. In addition, the participants in this study did not verbalize any of the three burnout symptoms--exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced accomplishment--identified by Madigan and Kim (2021). The NBE experiences of the participants in this study reflect the literature on retention.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this research highlight the deep-rooted passion for NBE among educators in Duluth despite the challenges they may face. To support teacher retention and job satisfaction, policymakers and school leaders should prioritize the creation of supportive environments for nature-based educators. This includes recognizing the unique contributions of these educators, providing resources for professional development, and fostering a culture of sustainability and well-being in the education

system. Moving forward, efforts to promote NBE should center on the needs and perspectives of educators, ensuring that they are valued and supported in their profession.

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## Playing in Nature

Peter Dargatz

### Introduction

Mountains of research prove that there should be no debate on the value of nature play in healthy whole-child development. Nature play takes the positive benefits of play to the next level. Playing in nature will not automatically solve every problem or instantly make everything better, but the research does not lie. Playing in nature improves skills necessary for academic success, self-regulation, and executive functioning, and it is tied to improved health and increased happiness. But before jumping into some serious nature play, four factors need to be considered.

### The "Unstructured" Fallacy

When I say play in nature, I don't simply mean adding more recess, though that wouldn't hurt. (The fact that many schools have opted to take recess away bit by bit bothers me. Using recess as a motivator for students to complete work and improve behavior annoys me, but punishing children for less-than-desirable behavior or incomplete work by taking recess away from them infuriates me. In my opinion, recess is a right. I feel the same way about play and time in nature.) My play-based philosophy emphasizes emergent play. Adults are there to observe and assist as needed but generally aim for a hands-off approach.

Emergent play is often synonymous with unstructured play. The word *unstructured* is misleading. Observant adults will appreciate the structure that exists in "unstructured" play. Nature play is not uncontrollable chaos; it is quite the opposite. When children lead, nature play has intense flexibility and organization, even though the untrained adult eye might initially see it as a free-for-all. Rather than use the erroneous term *unstructured*, try *emergent* or *child-led*. A tweak in terminology can go a long way. Similar to scaffolding in a traditional classroom, adults can participate in and guide nature play alongside their children. As children become more experienced with their environment, adults can lead less and observe more. Once a child has accumulated an



array of nature play experiences and subsequently earned the trust of their caregiver, they should be allowed the freedom and right to become the director of their play. To me, this is real play. It isn't forced on children or watered down to avoid risk. It celebrates risk and promotes problem-solving opportunities that provide children the power and trust to compromise, troubleshoot, and resolve issues that may arise.

### **Risk vs. Hazard**

Everyone must understand and value risk. Frequently considered a dirty word in education, schools often try (and fail) to eradicate and eliminate risk in the name of safety. But if you ask me, safety requires risk. Let me explain. Risk is everywhere. It's impossible (and irresponsible) to eliminate every risk for children. Risk is necessary, and its benefits far outweigh any drawbacks. Adults understandably feel the need to protect our children. But even with the best intentions, paving the way for every child's move does not equate to protecting them. In fact, sometimes, it can prove the opposite because when children grow up overly protected, their instinctual ability to assess and avoid actual hazards becomes compromised. By nature, children are risk-takers. They intentionally seek out risk, even in the structured and organized plastic playgrounds so commonly seen in parks and schools nationwide. Taking away children's ability to take risks by bubble-wrapping everything may actually lead them to pay less attention to their play, thus leading to carelessness and, ultimately, more injuries. Research suggests that children get injured in these "safer" playgrounds *because* the element of risk has been taken away. For example, children who fall on the soft, spongy surfaces of today's playgrounds never experience the consequences of falling. Besides interfering with a child's understanding of safety, eliminating all risk within play can also eliminate their creativity, challenge, and discovery. Without appropriate opportunities for risk, children may engage in unsafe activities that move from risky to hazardous to get the sense of adventure their bodies and minds crave. We take away that sense of adventure from children when we "protect" them with "safer" playground equipment.

Teachers and caregivers can help children regain crucial risk assessment skills to avoid hazards and hazardous actions with simple expectations, guidance, and observation.

Even with this guidance, adults often undervalue a child's self-assessment skills to "protect" the children. Children should be able to use a challenge-by-choice strategy to own more decision-making and control over how they use their bodies. Having children choose the challenges they are comfortable with provides them multiple opportunities to assess themselves and track their individual progress over time on a schedule that fits their developmental needs. When adults step back, children step up. Putting trust back in the hands of the children is the best way to provide a true play-based learning environment.

### **Missed Opportunities**

Dirt. Water. Weather. I call these the three misrepresented elements of nature play. Unfortunately, adults attempting to be proactive problem-solvers sometimes inhibit the magic of nature play by purposely avoiding these elements. Children like getting dirty, and, believe it or not, dirt and mud offer health benefits. Remember, dirt doesn't hurt. Water play can be risky, but water will dry! It also provides a prime example of understanding the difference between risk and hazard. Playing in perfect weather is ideal, but nature play in all weather encourages new perspectives and instills an appreciation for everything nature offers.

Having parents on board for a play-based classroom is helpful. Teaching and communicating the expectations of a play-based classroom is essential. This is even more important when much of the play is outdoors. Dirt, water, and weather can be huge obstacles when parents don't trust or understand the value of nature play. In nature play, there will be plenty of fun and learning. There will also be mud, crud, and blood. Families' stress and frustration about extra bandages and loads of dirty laundry can be minimized by keeping everyone in the loop about the whys and hows of nature play.

### **To Pick or Not to Pick**

Children (and adults) like going off the trail to explore and discover new things. Experiencing nature off-trail invites sensory experiences that bring play to the next level.

Children love picking flowers. They treasure trailblazing. They enjoy experimenting with a branch's flexibility. Going off-trail is memorable and meaningful, but it is also controversial. Do the risks of going off-trail outweigh the benefits? Are there hazards? Is the area in question ecologically vulnerable? Will the actions and activities associated with going off-trail leave lasting ecological impacts on the land? When you are playing outside of your yard or space, the expectations of that location must be respected. With some common sense and basic education in respecting the environment, going off-trail is an excellent element in responsible nature play.

Responsible nature play is not simply opening the door and sending children outside until the streetlights come on—it is a collaborative effort between children and adults. When these four factors are understood, practiced, and practiced again, children will once again be trusted to climb trees, catch critters, and live life under the guidance of Mother Nature and their imaginations.

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## The Power of Nature Play for Children

Rachel Larimore

*It might be a stick or a...Magic wand. Sword. Roof of the secret hideout. Fishing pole. Paintbrush. In play a stick can be any of these things and more! The opening line of the stick's induction into the National Toy Hall of Fame in 2008 was, "The stick may be the world's oldest toy." Where do children find this magical tool for their play? In nature of course!*

### Introduction

Nature provides a seemingly endless number of open-ended materials for children, making the play rich with possibilities. Not only does nature provide a plethora of materials for children to play *with*, but nature also provides a powerful backdrop for children's play. A backdrop that has incredible implications for children's physical, social-emotional, and cognitive health—as well as their connection with the natural world. We know play is powerful, a point our other white papers in this series highlight. However, play is even more powerful when it happens *in* (i.e., outside) and *with* nature (e.g., playing with a stick).

The setting—or playing *in* nature—takes children's play to an entirely new level for their happiness, growth, and development. Many of these impacts are separate from the kind of play children are engaged with. For example, one child might be creating a miniature imaginary world out of acorn tops and leaves while another child is building a massive rock wall. Yet both are immersed in the sensory-rich world of nature. Both are getting natural light into their eyes and on their skin, helping their eyes to develop and their body to absorb Vitamin D. So, while their brain is busy creating stories, their heart is busy connecting to themselves and their friends, their body is growing because they are simply *in* nature rather than being disconnected from nature indoors.

To expand on the idea that nature play 'levels up' children's learning, let us explore the growing evidence that suggests nature play, or play that occurs *in* and *with* nature, positively impacts children's development.

### ***Physical health***

Nature play and being in nature significantly impact children's overall well-being (Gill, 2014; McCurdy et al., 2010), including physical health. At its most basic impact on physical health, children are more physically active outdoors than indoors (Hartig et al., 2014; Christian et al., 2015; Tandon et al., 2015). This greater movement may be one of the factors that lead to children having a reduced risk of obesity when they have green spaces near their homes (Wolch et al., 2011). When this greater movement occurs in more natural play areas, with adaptable loose parts rather than fixed playground elements, children are seen to have better balance and coordination (Fjortoft, 2001). Additionally, research suggests that nature play increases the likelihood that young girls will continue to be active into their adolescent years (Pagels et al., 2014). In other words, nature play not only matters for their current health but may also help their future health.

In addition to benefits related to movement, there are other physical benefits to being outdoors. For example, time spent outdoors in the daylight supports eye development and thus reduces myopia, more commonly known as nearsightedness (Dolgin, 2015; French et al., 2013; He et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2008). Another benefit of sunlight exposure is increased Vitamin D levels (McCurdy et al., 2010). Vitamin D has a whole host of health benefits, including for our musculoskeletal and cardiovascular health, and there's even evidence to suggest a relationship between a lack of Vitamin D and asthma (Brehm et al., 2009). All this to say, simply being outdoors *in* nature benefits children's health—even if they're not playing *with* nature. Imagine the impact when nature and play are combined!

### ***Social-emotional health***

In addition to physical health, spending time outdoors also benefits children's social-emotional health. Nature helps children escape stress (Chawla, 2014; Wells & Evans, 2003), focus on tasks (Chawla, 2014; Faber et al., 2009), and form supportive social groups (Chawla et al., 2014). This is true for all children, as well as for some specific groups of children, such as those with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; Gill, 2014).

More specifically, nature has positive impacts on children's emotions. For example, nature seems to reduce children's stress levels. One study found that living 'nearby' nature can mitigate children's overall life stress (Wells & Evans, 2003). In addition to 'nearby' nature, the greenness of a schoolyard, or the presence of nature, is also associated with reducing children's stress (Chawla et al., 2014). For individual well-being, nature also seems to support greater happiness, less sadness (Roe & Aspinall, 2011), and less anger and aggression (Roe & Aspinall, 2011; Younan et al., 2016). This calmer state may allow children to experience the moments nature provides for wonder, joy, and inner peace, all supporting a child's spiritual development (Schein, 2014). These are all positive impacts we should want more of for our children.

All the emotional benefits mentioned above prepare children for positive interactions with others. Children's emotional health of being in nature influences their social relationships. This may be one of the reasons that time outdoors in nature has also been shown to support children's interactions with others (Chawla et al., 2014; Chawla, 2015; Gill, 2014).

### ***Cognitive health***

Social-emotional health, including children's inner worlds and relationships with others, is also foundational for cognitive health. For example, time in nature has specifically been shown to decrease symptoms of ADHD (Amoly, 2014; Faber et al., 2009) and provide increased resilience (Ernst et al., 2021). Being able to self-regulate, focus, and recover from adversity provides children with the mental capacity to grow in their executive functioning and other cognitive development. Time in natural play spaces also helps children to be better problem-solvers through creativity and critical thinking skills (Moore & Wong, 1997).

We should note that while our focus here is on nature play—an activity children have freely chosen—there is also growing evidence that nature-based activities have a role in more teacher-led activities and classroom-based settings (e.g., Chawla, 2015; Gill, 2014). Imagine if formal education leveraged both the power of learning *in* nature as well as play-based approaches to learning *with* the natural world!

## ***Environmental stewardship***

In addition to nature play's benefits to children, playing in nature also benefits the natural world because children develop a connection and care for nature. This nature play has been shown to lead to environmental stewardship or what is often referred to as pro-environmental behaviors (Chawla, 2015; Gill, 2014). The social-emotional and spiritual connections that come with frequent, positive experiences with nature are part of developing children's personal relationship with the natural world (Chawla, 2015). In other words, the more playful, joyful moments children have in nature, the more likely they are to care for the planet.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we know that play is powerful in and of itself. There is strong evidence that play, which occurs *in* and *with* nature, is beneficial to every domain of children's development. Thus, supporting children's access to nature play is critical for their well-being as well as for the care of the planet. Children's access to nature play is strongly influenced by three factors: routes to get to play spaces, features of the play spaces, and social settings and interactions (Gemmell et al., 2023). How might we provide children with more nature play spaces that are rich with space, time, and social interactions?

As we consider the power of play, let us also consider how play, both *in* and *with* nature, can help children thrive in living full, rich lives where their entire being—physical, cognitive, and social-emotional—is nurtured.

*For more information on the benefits of nature, visit Children & Nature Network at <https://www.childrenandnature.org>.*

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## Nature is Essential: Playing in Nature

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### Problem Statement

Play is considered an important contributor to children's healthy development. Play allows children to move with their bodies, engage in social interactions, learn about the world, use their imagination, problem-solve, and process feelings. Playing outside in a natural environment offers children many additional health and developmental benefits, such as the ability to stimulate children's senses in an integrated way, which can have a therapeutic impact (Cree & Robb, 2021).

Yet, compared to a few decades ago, children's time engaging in outdoor play has greatly decreased, both within early childhood education programs and at home (Dietze & Kashin, 2019). Many children do not have regular access to an outdoor play environment, or their parents and caregivers may not value nature play as an essential part of childhood. Additionally, urgent attention and action are needed to address environmental crises such as the loss of biodiversity, climate change, and pollution. As part of achieving sustainability goals, children must develop a strong attachment to natural places during their formative years. Positive experiences playing in nature in the early years inform children's environmental identity and values and thus could contribute to achieving education for sustainability goals set by the United Nations (UNESCO, n.d.).

### Background

Children's relationship with nature is not a new area of study or practice. Several influential early educators and theorists from the Euro-Western world have incorporated nature play into their educational practices. Indigenous philosophies have been grounded in connection with nature since time immemorial. Examples from Europe include Jean Jacques Rousseau, a French philosopher from the 18th century, who saw children as being pure and innocent and believed that they learn best directly from nature, and Friedrich Froebel, who developed the first kindergarten model in Germany,

which was, in fact, organized around the central concept of nature and gardens. In 1914, the McMillan sisters opened the first open-air nursery in London, England, which was guided by a belief that fresh air, exercise, whole foods, and bathing were key to the well-being of children (Dietze & Kashin, 2019). Within these early nurseries, children played on climbing equipment in sandpits and outdoor areas containing natural and manufactured objects (Dietze & Kashin, 2019). Maria Montessori, an Italian educator who worked with children in the slums of Italy at the turn of the 20th century, also incorporated outdoor sensory play into her educational approach (Knight, 2013).

More recently, work by researchers such as David Sobel (e.g., 2008) has examined children's play in nature more closely. White (2014) suggests that children's play in nature falls into the following categories:

- Becoming at home.
- Playing hunting and gathering games.
- Anthropomorphizing non-humans.
- Constructing adventures.
- Imaginative narratives.
- Pathways and journeys include the need to gain 'prospect' or height.
- Making rituals and giving gifts.

These categories of behaviors can help educators understand the role of play in developing children's attachment to nature and place and how to best support children. Adults play various roles regarding children's play in nature. These roles range from co-player to observer to organizer (e.g., setting up materials or provocations). Play experiences can be initiated and led by adults or children and can be seen as a cycle (Cree & Robb, 2021).

Additionally, there is a body of literature on "loose parts" that are often recommended for children's outdoor play. These are "open-ended, interactive, natural and manufactured materials that can be manipulated with limitless possibilities" (Gull, 2019, p.48). Loose parts include sticks, leaves, figurines, spoons, shovels, building blocks, pinecones, wood chips, etc. These can be easily found or brought to an outdoor area, providing children with play and learning possibilities. Dietze and Kashin (2019)

highlight that playing with loose parts can help promote 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and innovation.

Children's play in nature may appear differently within Indigenous cultures, though active play and traditional games have always been important in how children engage with the environment. Dramatic play with appropriate cultural materials can be a particularly effective way for children in early childhood programs to learn about their Indigenous values and culture (Peterson et al., 2018). Yet, it is important to remember that childhood, education, and human relationships with nature are all culturally and historically situated. The high importance placed on play for children's healthy development largely reflects Western culture (Gerlach et al., 2014).

### **Appropriate Approaches & Strategies**

There are various approaches and strategies by which children can have more opportunities for meaningful play in natural spaces and places. First, Nature-based early learning programs such as forest schools and nature preschools offer families part-time or full-time childcare programming centered around nature. Though these programs vary, overall, they are on the rise in North America (Harwood et al., 2020; North American Association for Environmental Education, 2020). A recent survey has found that there are over 800 programs in the USA, and most have a wait list, indicating growing demand (NAAEE, 2023). This approach to teaching is grounded in nature and outdoor play, and learning offers significant positive benefits to children's development. However, families do not all have equal access to these programs, which are often private and part-time and may require expensive outdoor clothing. Moreover, the specific teaching approach - or pedagogy - of some programs, such as forest schools, are based on a Eurocentric child-centered and play-based approach and may appeal to families that seek programs that match their cultural and family values (Boileau et al., 2021). Barriers preventing equal access to outdoor preschools, such as financial, logistical, and cultural, have been identified (Brown, n.d.). Some programs offer a sliding scale of payment or bursaries for lower-income families; these are promising solutions, but overall, the American nature preschool movement needs to continue to question who is being left out of such programs and how this can be addressed.

Next, addressing equitable access to green and natural spaces to families is crucial so children have a safe place to play nearby. Evidence shows that families in the USA have disproportionate access to parks and other outdoor spaces. Children in lower-income neighborhoods have fewer parks in proximity, are more likely inactive, have too much screen time, and are more likely to be overweight (Reuben et al., 2020). Additionally, people of color have less access to large parks through public transit than non-Hispanic White people (Park et al., 2021). These inequities must be addressed so that children can easily have a place to play outside, especially living in a home with no backyard. Promising strategies include urban planning that involves underrepresented communities, municipal efforts to promote outdoor play for all children through free programming, urban greening efforts, nature equity mapping, public transit improvements, and community grants for projects that promote children's outdoor play. Researchers, community members, and educators/teachers should be critical of an idealized and romantic version of children's play in nature, given the diversity of ways communities may feel comfortable engaging with the outdoors. Some of this stems from a history of slavery and racial violence, which has led to the outdoors being considered a safer space for White people (Finney, 2014). Playing in and with nature does not need to be in a pristine forest; it can occur in an urban park setting or wherever families and communities feel safe and accepted.

One final appropriate strategy is to approach children's nature play through the lens of sustainability. Specifically, play materials offered to children should be culturally appropriate and representative of the diverse society in which we live, and attention should be paid to the sustainability of products, for example, avoiding overuse of plastic toys and items that may break or wear easily and subsequently be thrown in the garbage. Many nature-based early childhood programs rely on materials that promote exploratory play in the natural environment, such as magnifying glasses, field guides, binoculars, etc. This can help children develop a sense of place and an understanding of the various species and beings that live in that area. In this way, outdoor play can help support the development of children's ecological identity (Pelo, 2013). Among the recommendations from UNESCO on addressing the different Sustainable Development Goals in age-appropriate ways, play is a key tool during the early years (UNESCO,

n.d.). Thus, environmental sustainability should be considered in program planning and delivery using materials, energy, and resource use, consideration for impact on the land, and choices around the teaching approach that promotes values of sustainability and conservation.

## **Conclusion & Recommendations**

Regular, repeated time spent in nature allows children to feel in tune with their local environment, gain a sense of place and belonging, and develop an understanding of natural processes and cycles. Playing outside in nature also has positive effects, such as opportunities for imaginative play, adventurous play, risky play, and social and cultural learning. Outdoor play should be promoted both at home and in the classroom as an essential part of childhood and one of the ways for society to move towards a sustainable future. Recommendations include increased access to nature-based early childhood programs for all children, equitable access to green spaces such as urban parks and large parks, and an emphasis on sustainability and environmental conservation education.

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## How Does the Environment Impact Play?

Kim Moroney

### Introduction

The environment serves as a dynamic and evolving context which impacts play. Environments influentially enable and enrich play, or diversely, environments can constrain and obstruct play. A nuanced understanding of environments elevates the positive impact on play and calls upon the need for thoughtful observation, consideration, decision-making, and reflection.

### Environment's Impact on Play

Environments include physical, social, emotional, and cultural elements. Welcoming, safe, and inclusive indoor and outdoor environments respect, nurture, and encourage play for all. Culturally responsive environments honour differences and celebrate the diversity of ethnic, cultural, linguistic, family, and a child's individual diversity, such as needs, capabilities, interests, age, and gender.

The environment is not, nor can it be, a replication of somewhere or something else. It exists in time in a particular context and in relationship with the people in that space. It does not exist in isolation. It is part of the school's culture and reflects community values. Such understandings require a commitment to Early Childhood philosophies, theories, pedagogy, and evidence-based practice.

The environment influences play, and play influences the environment. Key theorists such as Vygotsky, Steiner, and Montessori all emphasize the role of the environment. Relationships between the environment, the child, and the adult (educator/teacher/parent/carer) are intertwined and reciprocal, with the environment often referred to as the "third teacher." This metaphor, initiated and informed by the Reggio Emilia Approach, identifies the environment's power to influence teaching and learning (Gandini, 1993), but what is the environment's impact on play?

A growing body of evidence documenting children's use of the environment in play continues to emerge. Play and learning are not just something that happens in a vacuum, but they are structured by the environments children live and play in as well as by peers, parents, and other people around them (Bustamante et al., 2019). Children have agency in play as they actively and curiously explore and creatively engage with their surroundings. In play, children interact with the environment to make sense of the world, take risks, expand their knowledge, understanding, perception, and experience, move their bodies, and employ their senses and emotions.

### **Considerations to Enhance the Environment**

Indoor environments need to be planned and designed for optimal play opportunities. Considerations include flexible and accessible resources, spaces for meaningful interactions for individual and group play, calm spaces, and spaces for collaboration. Thoughtful deliberation about colour, light, space, flow, use of natural materials, reducing sensory overload, and ensuring respectful displays of children's creations, learnings, and theories created in play are essential for prior to school and in school settings. Indoor environments often lend themselves to socio-dramatic play, play with objects, symbolic play, and construction.

Considerations when re-imagining indoor environments may include:

- Is there a need to declutter?
- Is the environment overcrowded with colour?
- Are items intentionally and meaningfully placed?
- Are resources/loose parts accessible to children?
- Does the space encourage joyful play?
- Is there sufficient ventilation?
- Is plenty of natural daylight entering the space to create warmth and enhance the mood and focus?
- Has purposeful thought gone into the furnishings?

- Have children been involved in designing and creating playful and inviting spaces such as provocations to construct, inquire, explore, discover, wonder, imagine, and tinker?
- Do children have agency in decisions about play?

Outdoor environments with open spaces, natural elements, and built structures provide an array of play opportunities often unavailable indoors. Such environments invite the child to engage in elements from nature and provide opportunities for playful, open-ended interactions, exploration, self-regulation, risk-taking, oral language, and physical pursuits such as running, hanging, swinging, spinning, climbing, jumping, balancing, digging, tumbling, and hiding. The importance of the outdoor environment is becoming increasingly more intentional and research-driven in schools, which are taking the lead from early childhood settings. Effective outdoor environments give children multiple ways to practice and refine skills through play and make or construct meaning and knowledge of the world through their interactions and experiences, therefore making meaning about their lives. The richness of play in the outdoor environment develops a love of nature while developing an understanding that we are not separate from nature. It contributes to positive sustainability values, knowing that we receive gifts from nature and our actions impact nature.

There are increasing concerns about the disconnection between children and nature and about risk-averse environments, sedentary technology experiences, and a lack of time for unstructured outdoor play experiences. To decrease sedentary childhoods, a refocus must be on design for outdoor free play in everyday naturalized settings (Moore, 2014). The look and feel of an environment matter when serving children, making them feel welcomed, valued, and encouraged to play.

Considerations when re-imagining outdoor environments include:

- How are the perspectives of children, teachers, educators, and families considered when deciding about the outdoor environment and how children interact with it in play?

- Is connection to nature and natural resources an essential feature of the outdoor environment?
- Is sustainability a feature of the space?
- Are there resources that have been re-imaged, reused, or recycled?
- Are there opportunities for physical play?
- What are the real safety issues and risks, and what are the perceived ones?
- Is "risk-benefit" a part of the conversation?
- Is there an opportunity for the child to self-regulate?
- Are outdoor spaces designed for joyful play, not just activity?
- Is there an opportunity for physical play, imaginative play, construction, gathering, and hiding spaces?
- Is there room for the flow of play?
- Is there an opportunity for multi-age play?
- Are quality loose parts available?

One of the most critical environmental features impacting play in indoor and outdoor environments is the purposeful consideration of loose parts, those open-ended materials (natural or man-made) that can be collected, moved, carried, combined, lined up, manipulated, and reimagined in play. Loose parts include but are not restricted to items such as stones, stumps, sand, gravel, fabric, twigs, wood, pallets, balls, buckets, baskets, crates, boxes, logs, stones, ladders, flowers, rope, tyres, scarves, ribbon, blocks, balls, shells, keys, feathers, water, pebbles, leaves, seed pods etc.

The versatility of loose parts offers endless play adventures and provides agency for children to think critically about their play. Careful and informed decision-making is required to provide loose parts that enhance play and reflect what is familiar to those occupying the space. This contributes to the notion of the environment as a living space for play. Resources and loose parts introduce novelty and provoke interest, engagement, and inquiry, which leads to more complex and abstract thinking in play. Loose parts have infinite play possibilities due to their total lack of structure and script. By using loose parts in play, children develop a sense of autonomy as they have the freedom to explore varied materials independently. In any environment, the degree of

inventiveness and creativity and the possibility of discovery are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it (Nicholson, 1972). Loose parts should have no defined use, be accessible by the child, and be regularly replenished, changed, and added.

Impactful indoor and outdoor environments are:

- Flexible spaces, committed to environmental sustainability,
- Responsive to the rights, capabilities, interests, and needs of the child,
- Welcoming spaces that invite and provoke,
- Beautiful spaces which connect to heart, mind, and spirit,
- Accessible and intentional,
- Spaces for shared and collaborative thinking,
- Representative of the setting/school and the people who occupy the space,
- Part of a time and place that connects to children, families, teachers, educators, and the community.

## **Conclusion**

The environment is forever evolving and influenced by stakeholders such as children, educators, teachers, families, and community members. It aims to inspire a sense of wonder and awe about the world. The environment provides an aesthetic of engagement, meaning, beauty, and joy! It enables and enriches learning, development, well-being, and play. It welcomes and entices! It invites and provokes! The environment whispers and often shouts to the child, come play!

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## Equitable Access to Nature-Based Play Through Public Policy

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Across the ages and in every culture, childhood has included time playing in and exploring the outdoors. This time spent playing in nature is not only fun and a place of fond memories but also has [many benefits](#), from strong social connections to increased physical activity, improved mental health, better preparation for school, and a love and care for the environment. A logical conclusion is that every child should have daily outdoor opportunities and reap these benefits.

While nature and outdoor recreational opportunities may seem freely accessible to everyone, certain groups can access these open spaces more easily than others. Throughout most of the United States, higher-income white families tend to be closer to higher-quality and easier-to-access outdoor spaces than lower-income communities and communities of color. Frequently, these differences are rooted in decisions made decades ago that prioritized affluent and predominantly white neighborhoods for nature and outdoor access.

In 2020, the [Center for American Progress](#) (CAP) authored a [report](#) that found the United States has fewer forests, streams, wetlands, and other natural places near where Black, Latino, and Asian American people live. Notably, families with children — especially families of color with children — have less access to nature nearby than the rest of the country. In other words, families in these communities are nature-deprived. The report explains that this discrepancy in access to nature is not a happenstance; it is a direct result of systemic racism.

Housing redlining and similar policy decisions made decades ago make it more difficult for certain populations to live in residential neighborhoods near or with access to



outdoor recreational opportunities. And in some cases, efforts designed to remove outdoor recreational spaces for lower-income communities and prioritize them for higher-income neighborhoods continue today. The CAP report concludes that “as a result, Black, Latino, Asian, Native American, and low-income families are far more likely than white families to live in a place that is deprived of the benefits that nature provides, including nearby places that allow them to get outside safely and access clean water, clean air, and a diversity of wildlife.”

The CAP report also found that another group is consistently being deprived of access to nature and the outdoors: children. Adult access to nature seems to have been prioritized over child access, with the CAP finding that “census tracts in the contiguous 48 states and Washington, D.C., with large numbers of families with children under the age of 18 are nearly twice as likely to live in nature-deprived areas than families who do not have children under the age of 18. In every single state except Louisiana, families and individuals with young children were more nature-deprived than families and individuals without young children. These data echo the Trust for Public Lands’ finding that 27 million children lack access to a quality park close to home.”

As can be expected, children in families with fewer resources and families of color face the most significant challenges in accessing nature. The CAP report found that “three-fourths of census tracts with large numbers of families of color with children live in nature-deprived places, while less than 40 percent of white families with children do. Black and Latino or Hispanic families with children were the most nature-deprived of any race or ethnicity examined.”

Recent research shows how these discrepancies persist when looking at playgrounds, one of the most common outdoor recreation spaces. In 2022, the national nonprofit [KABOOM!](#) and a team of researchers from North Carolina State University and the College of Charleston found that “historic inequities have left many children in low-resourced communities and communities of color with less access to quality play

spaces, limiting their ability to fully experience the physical, social, and emotional health benefits of play.”

Specifically, there are four ways that access to playgrounds is inequitable throughout the United States.

*First*, lower-income families, families of color, or those living in urban or rural areas live farther away from playgrounds than white, higher-income families. *Second*, the quality of playgrounds (in terms of the age, safety of playground components, and the variety of playground components) is better in higher-income and white neighborhoods than in lower-income communities and communities of color. This results in some groups having to travel longer distances for playground access or to settle for poor-quality playgrounds close to home. *Third*, the infrastructure surrounding playgrounds varies based on the neighborhood composition. For example, cracked or non-existent sidewalks, poor lighting, or safety concerns in areas around the playground are more common in low-income communities and communities of color. These differences in infrastructure affect access to playgrounds. *Finally*, discriminatory land use, housing policy, and zoning laws also limit where playgrounds can be placed, and decades-old decisions to remove playgrounds and other recreational places (rather than integrate them) have created neighborhoods with limited spaces for play.

Those with the least access can benefit the most from quality nature spaces and nature-based experiences. [A systematic review of 143 studies](#) by Caoimhe Twohig-Bennett and Andy Jones revealed that the association between greenspace exposure and positive health outcomes was more robust for people with low socioeconomic status and people living in the most resource-deprived communities than for people in more advantaged situations.

### **Quantifying and identifying areas that have inequitable access to nature and play**

Inequitable access to nature and playgrounds is a daunting national problem. To solve this problem, we need to identify areas where the most inequity occurs. Fortunately, the

[Children & Nature Network](#), [National League of Cities](#), and KABOOM! are using publicly available data and mapping tools to prioritize communities with the greatest needs.

In 2023, KABOOM! created the [Playspace Inequity Prioritization Index](#) (PIPI) to help estimate where playspace inequity is most likely occurring. PIPI scores highlight trends in playspace inequity, allowing KABOOM! and its partners to make data-informed choices for more equitable investments in building and modernizing playspaces. The overall PIPI score is a single value calculated for every community in the United States using 21 different publicly available data points.

Similar tools exist for estimating access to parks and nature. [Trust for Public Land's ParkServe tool](#) identifies communities that do not have access to a park within a 10-minute walk. [NatureQuant's NatureScore tool](#) identifies communities that do not have access to nature, with a particular focus on access to green and blue spaces. The National League of Cities and Children & Nature Network developed a [GIS equity mapping toolkit](#) to help local communities understand how to access and use data to create maps to illustrate how nature and playspace inequity affects their localities.

In combination, these tools help us identify communities that would most benefit from focused investments in increasing access to nature and outdoor recreation opportunities.

### **Public policy plays a crucial role in creating equitable access to nature and play.**

Public policy and funding — at all levels of government — can provide critical opportunities to increase equitable access to nature and play. The following are examples of policies, funding, and planning processes that serve as key drivers in ushering in change: The [Youth Outdoor Policy Playbook](#) is a great state-level tool that highlights efforts around the country. The [Cities Connecting Children to Nature Initiative](#) and key resources from KABOOM!'s [25 in 5 Initiative to End Playspace Inequity](#) provide local public sector policy and partnership examples.

Access to nature and play spaces in communities, in schools via [green schoolyard](#) efforts, and in larger state and national parks is the first critical step in closing the equity gap. A variety of public policy strategies exist, including developing such spaces, providing public transportation options, and creating public parks on school grounds. Below are examples of public policy in action:

- *Community playspaces*

Building community playspaces is an opportunity for community engagement and innovative design. A core principle in designing these spaces is working with community members, including children. [Learn more](#) about how KABOOM! unites with communities to build kid-designed playspaces.

- *City planning*

Amending city planning processes and resources also ensures natural play components are built into new spaces for children. The City of Austin codified nature playspaces through the development of [nature play strategies](#), which provide best practices for the design, installation, maintenance, and management of nature play in City parks.

- *City and county parks master plans and environmental master plans*

Most cities and counties develop master plans for their park systems, and an increasing number are creating plans to mitigate the impacts of climate change and increase the sustainability of public space systems. Developing a strategy to ensure those plans have a focus on children and the spaces in which they play and learn can be vital to unlocking public funding or ensuring those spaces are not developed for other purposes. Much like with community playspaces, engaging adults and youth from communities of color, youth councils, and residents of affected neighborhoods is important for community buy-in and ultimate use. For example, Denver's [Game Plan for a Healthy City](#) provides a 20-year comprehensive city/county plan to ensure equitable access to parks and open spaces. Additionally, Madison incorporated nature access in the city's Comprehensive Plan, and Grand Rapids adopted a Parks Master Plan focusing on equitable nature access.

- *Youth outdoor equity grants*

New Mexico has the [Outdoor Equity Fund](#), which has provided over \$5.7 million to over 250 organizations that support diverse youth from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds and abilities. This funding supports outdoor experiences that foster stewardship and respect for the natural world and cultural heritage.

- *Recess requirements*

Closing the play and nature gap means providing more time to play, engage in physical activity, take a brain break, and spend time outdoors. Several states, including [Illinois](#) and [Washington State](#), have passed measures requiring at least 30 minutes of recess daily. A critical piece to such policies is banning the withholding of recess for behavioral issues, a practice that disproportionately affects students of color.

- *Outdoor nature-based pre-K and childcare*

Fostering a love of nature does not need to wait until kindergarten. Early childhood is the perfect time to [engage parents and young children in the outdoors](#), from nature walks and adventures to outdoor nature-based early childhood programs and facilities. Washington State developed the United States' first [outdoor nature-based child care regulations](#) and [competencies](#), which support cultural inclusion and responsiveness specific to nature-centered programming. [Several examples of cities](#) also create outdoor engagement opportunities for early learners.

Solutions for creating equitable access to nature exist in partnership with communities and government. Cities, states, tribal governments, and the federal government all play critical convening, policy, and funding roles in collaboration with various sectors, including health, parks, education, youth development, early learning, sustainability and resilience, and outdoor recreation. Creating systemic change with communities of color in a co-leading capacity in visioning, design, and implementation will help ensure equitable access to nature. We can design a world where all children, regardless of race or location, play in the outdoors daily to experience the benefits of nature and build fond memories that last a lifetime.

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## Every Child Deserves A Break

- [The Liink Project<sup>®</sup> - Developing Healthier, Resilient Children through School Recess and Character Skills](#)
- [Are Playgrounds Meeting Children's Play Needs?](#)
- [The Importance of Choice](#)



## The LiiNK<sup>®</sup> Project: Developing Healthier, Resilient Children through School Recess and Character Skills

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### **Problem**

As a nation, we have moved farther and farther away from what the child needs in school and focused more and more on what the adults want and expect from children. The U.S. wants to be at the top educationally, but they are going about it the wrong way. Since the 1980s, State and federal education officials have replaced an emphasis on a well-rounded education with an emphasis on standardized test scores. Instead of asking if the standardized tests are reliable and valid or if they accurately measure knowledge versus measuring what students have memorized, they continue to use these tests as a marker of excellence. Standardized tests contribute to a large majority of children exhibiting chronic stress and burnout by third grade (Rhea, 2021). The emotional and cognitive pressures and the extended preparation for a test score versus well-rounded content have removed whole child developmental needs from the elementary school setting.

Research shows nothing activates a child's brain and whole child development like unstructured, outdoor play (Levitin, 2021; Medina, 2014; Rhea, 2021). Although this is common knowledge, school administrators provide limited opportunities for unstructured, outdoor play (i.e., recess) in the elementary school setting (Ramstetter & Murray, 2017). The lack of school recess throughout each day has led to less time on task and lower academic scores, all while showing a sharp increase in an external locus of control (things happen to me), narcissism, and emotional instability (e.g., anxiety, stress, depression, suicide, homicide) (Gray, 2017).

The combination of emotional instability and high-stakes testing has led to many more teacher challenges in the classroom and a recognition that the children are struggling with brain health and social/emotional skills. Levitin (2021), a neuroscientist studying the brain and fatigue, found that children should not be overly scheduled. For example, expecting children to focus on multiple content activities for 2-2 ½ hours before having a break is detrimental. He believes children need outdoor play breaks to



promote spontaneity and creativity. Without that time, kids do not have the mental space to let new ideas and ways of doing things arise in the classroom. Daydreaming and outdoor play are crucial to developing the kind of creativity many say should be a focal point of a modern education system (Medina, 2014). If we as a nation strive to develop healthier, more resilient children who become a sustainable, healthy adult workforce, the LiiNK® Project (Let's Inspire Innovation N' Kids®), through adhering to the four key strategies, is an excellent place to start.

## **Background**

Over a decade ago, a whole child school intervention, LiiNK, was created and launched because U.S. schools were moving in the wrong direction, evidenced by consistently lower standardized test scores, and a rise in ADHD-like characteristics, discipline issues, physical and mental health issues, obesity, and an external locus of control. LiiNK was inspired and developed by investigating Finland's 20-year intentional school practices. LiiNK also included effective practices from former U.S. schools (Rhea, 2019). LiiNK's mission has never wavered. Its mission is to address the gap between academics and physical, social, emotional, and cognitive health using four key strategies: (1) three full days of training to address effective LiiNK protocols and procedures, (2) implementation of four 15-minute recesses daily, (3) inclusion of 15–20-minute daily character development lessons, and (4) implementation of Trauma Based Relational Intervention® (TBRI®; Purvis et al., 2013) strategies.

These combined strategies continue to be the fundamental backbone of school reform. As with any program development, strategy implementation becomes more robust as protocols and procedures are developed and adapted to meet each school district's unique needs while maintaining program fidelity. Since LiiNK is operational in pre-K through grade 8 across 80 diverse schools in three U.S. states, we have continually focused on what works well and needs improvement. Urban, suburban, rural, private, public, and charter schools have implemented the LiiNK intervention with similar successes. A brief description of each LiiNK program strategy is shared below.

1. *Four 15-minute recesses are scheduled throughout the school day.* Recess is defined as free, risky play that is child-directed within a safe environment with no

adult influence. Examples of free, risky play in schools are running freely in open spaces, rolling down hills, climbing trees, using play equipment such as monkey bars and swings, jumping from higher places, and actively engaging with nature (digging for rocks, using branches/sticks to build things, curiosity with insects, birds, butterflies), or playing in a sandbox. The children are not required to engage in physical activity of any kind—they are free to choose what to do, although they are physically active approximately 96% of the time (Webb & Rhea, 2023a, 2023b). Two 15-minute recesses are typically scheduled before lunch and two after lunch, totaling 60 minutes daily for the whole school year. Teachers are prohibited from removing any recesses for discipline issues or content tutoring, a common practice in U.S. schools, and physical education cannot replace recess. LiINK believes physical education and recess are very different learning experiences; both are needed for whole child development.

2. *A 15-20 minute specific character development curriculum is integrated into the daily schedule.* Integrating character education into the school day enhances the school's culture by fostering social-emotional development. The curriculum we chose is Positive Action® (PA, 2007), emphasizing empathy, respect, honesty, trust, self-esteem, and school connectedness. Positive Action was selected because it is recognized in the U.S. as one of the most effective evidence-based practice character education programs (USDOE, 2007). Positive Action is one of the only character education curricula that simultaneously improves academics and reduces problem behaviors in school environments (Lewis et al., 2021). This curriculum is developmentally appropriate, scoped, and sequenced for each grade level, Pre-Kindergarten through grade 12, and includes daily lessons, no more than 15-20 minutes throughout the school year. These daily lessons include teaching and reteaching new concepts to increase retention and reinforce the strategies.
3. Trauma-based Relational Intervention® (TBRI®) strategies are integrated into the classroom, recess, and other facets of the school setting. We have found that not all schools can be as successful with LiINK without addressing the percentage of children who have already experienced trauma, abuse, or neglect and need a

more supportive school environment. Many of the discipline issues, especially tempers, depression, and anxiety, can be diffused, and children can become much more trusting of their peers and their teachers/principals if the school personnel know how to recognize and address these trauma-informed attachment issues when they first arise (Stipp & Kilpatrick, 2021). We have picked TBRI because of its effectiveness across many settings, especially in schools.

4. *Three full days of teacher/administrator strategic training is required to prepare for LiiNK® project implementation.* For the LiiNK program to work, training is needed to address each strategy. The first training day focuses on changing the teacher's mindset related to being outdoors and taking time to re-energize themselves and their students. The second training day focuses on implementing multiple recesses each day and teaching the Positive Action® curriculum. The third training day combines all the strategies learned and shows teachers how their class schedules will look so that a Fall implementation can be as seamless as possible. Spreading the training sessions across several weeks in the Spring, before Fall implementation, gives teachers and administrators time to absorb the information and more readily embrace the forthcoming changes.

From a school administrator's perspective and the LiiNK intervention, program is only sustainable if the results show academic growth and an improved school climate. The following results show what LiiNK can do for whole child development compared to traditional schools. Remember that these results reflect the LiiNK schools offering 60 minutes of recess daily compared to traditional schools with 30 minutes or less daily recess. Traditional programs used for these findings were matched demographically.

### **Academic Outcomes**

(Bauml, Patton, & Rhea, 2020; Rhea & Bauml, 2018)

- LiiNK children score 12% and 10% higher in math and reading comprehension than traditional school students on state standardized tests

(many of these schools are Title I; over 65% Hispanic; urban).

- In schools where children score 2-3 grade levels above their actual grade level in math and reading before LiiNK, they continue to score at these levels after the LiiNK intervention.

#### **Brain Health: LiiNK children...**

- LiiNK improves on-task behaviors by up to 40% in the first year, while traditional schools see a 0-2% change in that same year. This is reflected in a gain of 60-120 quality instructional minutes per day due to the intervention sustainability over 3+ years (Rhea & Rivchun, 2018; Rhea et al., 2018).
- LiiNK students demonstrate more brain power, focus, and energy throughout every day of every year, while traditional school children show more fatigue daily and over every school year (Lund et al., 2017).

#### **Physical Health:**

- Seven percent of LiiNK overweight children shifted to healthy weight over three years, while 17% of traditional overweight children shifted to obese over the same three years (Rhea, 2021).
- Obesity percentages in both groups remained static over the school year, meaning 60 minutes of recess does not influence this group of children, no matter how much time is given for recess (Farbo & Rhea, 2022; Farbo et al., 2020).
- Muscular strength, limb balance, and motor competence improved significantly, with LiiNK results noting fewer improper falls and injuries while better preparing for sports (Campbell-Pierre & Rhea, 2022; Webb & Rhea, 2023a & 2023b).
- LiiNK children are no longer bothered by cuts and scrapes, bruises, splinters, and insect bites, to name a few. They develop resilience due to moving in different ways and experiencing risky play when provided these opportunities (Bauml et al., 2018).
- Many parents worry their sons will be in more trouble once starting school due to their inability to sit still for long periods. LiiNK boys show few discipline issues due to the breaks provided throughout the day

[www.liinkproject.tcu.edu](http://www.liinkproject.tcu.edu)).

**Emotional Health:** (Clark & Rhea, 2017; Kirby & Rhea, 2022; Webb, R & Rhea, 2023)

**LiiNK children...**

- score significantly lower each year on chronic stress in the fall and Spring. LiiNK has noted that stress levels are more elevated in the Spring with the LiiNK and traditional groups of children due to standardized testing.
- score significantly better on emotion regulation, i.e., being able to recognize/interpret others' facial expressions and body language more accurately for more positive relationships.
- score significantly better during recess on positive emotions and happiness.

**Social Skills:** (Rhea et al., 2018; Webb, R & Rhea, 2023)

**LiiNK children...**

- significantly improve prosocial behaviors, honesty, and empathy and decrease bullying incidents compared to traditional school children.
- shift from an external locus of control to an internal locus of control (the child makes things happen) as they interact with nature and others during recess, with no adult influence, over at least three years in the program. In contrast, traditional school children remain narcissistic and externally driven by peers and teachers.

### **Appropriate Approaches/Strategies**

Due to LiiNK's intent to change existing sedentary and indoor school cultures with outdoor, risky, child-directed play breaks (recess), implementing the protocol and procedures has required a great deal of teamwork, reflection, and refinement over time. School leaders and teachers often ask us how they can bring positive changes to their campuses in the spirit of LiiNK®. A few strategies assist in moving schools in this direction.

First, we recommend that schools with limited recess begin by requiring one 15–20-minute recess daily for all elementary grade levels. This will allow students and

teachers time to adjust to one recess consistently. Then, add a second 15-minute recess at another time of day, so students have at least one break before lunch and one after lunch. Although some schools offer a single 30-minute recess, the idea is to provide shorter, more frequent breaks throughout the day to minimize fatigue.

Second, avoid allowing teachers to withhold recess as a punishment or for children to do extra work while others go to recess. Outdoor playtime is as much for teachers as it is for students. Furthermore, all children deserve opportunities to play; they need time to rejuvenate themselves and prepare their brains for the next instructional period.

Third, keep the number of school hours constant. Our work with schools has found no need to extend the school day to make time for more recess, character development, and TBRI strategies. LiiNK® data has shown that students can focus better throughout the day because of the required recess breaks. These breaks increase instruction time and improve positive social interaction skills learned on the playground.

Finally, a good character education program and trauma-informed strategies should be implemented to help promote an empathetic, positive school environment. Simply increasing time spent outdoors can backfire if children are not given opportunities to experience empathy and other social skills. With the addition of several play breaks daily in a school setting, we learned that character lessons are essential for a more productive learning space for children. Once we implemented these strategies into the school day, we found that the playground and school environment became much safer, happier, engaged, and healthy for each grade level involved in the project.

### **Conclusions/Recommendations**

The LiiNK intervention has shown that when recess is offered throughout each school day for a total of 60 minutes, standardized test scores improve, and children begin to thrive in the school environment. In addition, character development and trauma-informed strategies are essential since many children today have never experienced empathy, learned how to make responsible decisions and own their choices, think critically and creatively, and problem-solve both on and off the

playground, and for many, have experienced trauma, abuse, or neglect. These fundamental strategies are needed to activate the child's brain and promote whole child development. Parents are the key to change in public schools. Getting involved with School Health Advisory Councils or equivalent where available, attending school board meetings, and deciding who to vote for at the state education committee levels is very important for school personnel to have more freedom to make more developmentally appropriate decisions.

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## Are Playgrounds Meeting Children's Play Needs?

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### **Problem Statement**

For a variety of reasons, today's children have far fewer opportunities for self-directed free play outdoors. Urbanization, a perceived fear of strangers among adults, concerns about traffic, the prioritization of academic learning, rapidly increasing hours per day of screen use, and the overscheduling of children's lives have all contributed to a decline in children's play (Singer & Hirsh-Pasek, 2005). This reduction in play opportunities for children aligns with data showing rapidly rising rates of depression, anxiety, obesity, myopia, and attention and behavior disorders among children, creating a public health crisis (Louv, 2005). An immediate and full-scale response by all adults and organizations who work with and advocate for children's health and well-being is essential, and one solution is so simple that we tend to overlook it: bring back outdoor play by creating playgrounds that truly meet children's needs.

### **Background**

Playgrounds, whether in public spaces, schoolyards, childcare centers, or backyards, are regarded by adults as the place where children are most likely to experience child-led free play, which is defined as activity that is (1) self-chosen and self-directed; (2) intrinsically motivated; (3) guided by mental rules; (4) imaginative; and (5) conducted in an active, alert, but relatively non-stressed frame of mind (Gray, 2013). This play, which involves freedom of choice, is different from play that is structured and directed by adults. Free play supports children's overall physical and mental health, in addition to helping children develop critical skills and competencies such as appropriate

risk-taking, critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and social skills, self-regulation, empathy, the development of independence, self-esteem, and confidence (Spencer et al., 2019).

In his book *Play and Playscapes* (1992), Joe Frost described three essential elements in playground design: the contents, the safety, and the *play value* of the playground or what should a playground do? When we consider most American playgrounds, the contents are predictable: manicured outdoor areas that contain colorful, fixed structures made of coated metal, wood, and/or plastic that reflect a prevailing adult attitude that gross motor play is the primary goal. These playgrounds play an important role, but when we start to think about safety, professionals who understand children's play more broadly assess these playgrounds as "too safe," to the point that children become bored and look elsewhere for risk and/or challenge, often in places unintended by adults. Both public and schoolyard playgrounds are often not exciting or stimulating for children. Despite designs that maximize safety, playgrounds are no safer than before safety laws changed in the early 1980s (Rosin, 2014). The last essential element, play value, has been defined more recently as how much play, that is, true free play, you can get out of something (Newstead, 2004). In essence, for play to be truly valuable, play objects must be engaging and foster active participation from children.

Frost continued by stating:

All too commonly, despite the best intentions of adults who influence, design, and build playgrounds, the results are sterile, uninspired, and inappropriate for children's play. Parents and professionals intent on

improving play places for children subscribe to the temptation to solve play problems and needs with a quick, easy fix – call the local play equipment representative and pick a glossy, new play structure for the backyard, the child care center, school, or public park, and resolve your guilt and concern. Throughout this entire process, no one reflects on playscapes through the eyes of the child or devotes the thought and time needed to make play environments vibrant, child-centered places (1992).

Thirty years after Frost’s comments, today’s playgrounds may not be vibrant, child-centered play environments that offer children the sustained, joyful, self-directed free play they crave and their bodies and minds need for healthy development and well-being. We have provided three strategies below to mitigate these issues.

### **Appropriate Approaches/Strategies**

In this section, we examine the best practices for assessing and designing playgrounds and broaden our understanding of what a playground can be.

#### **Strategy # 1: Regularly assess play environments and how children engage in them.**

Perhaps the most important thing adults can do to understand children’s play and improve access to stimulating environments is to assess the current environments where children play. While playground safety assessments exist and are standard practice, tools that assess elements like play value, play materials, access to nature, risk, and changeability are limited.

For preschools specifically, a few options exist. The Preschool Outdoor Environment Measurement Scale (POEMS) assesses the quality of outdoor preschool

environments and their use while also providing guidance to assist in making changes. The tool includes checklists for teachers, administrators, and landscape architects, guidance on funding and policy initiatives, and a resource for measuring the implications of improvements (Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2024). Similarly, the Head Start Body Start Play Space Assessment aids Head Start and other early childhood educators in assessing the quality of outdoor play areas for children aged 3-5, including elements such as movement opportunities, flexibility and play, and risk and challenge (Play Space Assessment for Preschool, 2024). The Go NAPSACC Outdoor Play and Learning Self-Assessment covers a range of outdoor activities focused on both physical activity and other learning activities. These include time spent outdoors daily, the number of play areas, and topics included in staff professional development on outdoor play (Ward et al., 2014). Lastly, the Nature-Based Environmental Rating Scale (NABERS) looks at childcare settings program-wide through a nature-based lens to assess program goals and curriculum practices, staffing, indoor and outdoor environments, community partnerships, and family engagement.

Though not originally designed as a tool to understand children's play or play environments, the Leuven Scale may help adults gather data that informs the design and use of play spaces. The Leuven Scale is an easy-to-use 5-point scale that simply measures a child's emotional well-being and involvement. Through observation, adults can gather data on different play types, how engaged children are, with what objects, where they play, for how long, and note the play features and play areas that hold little interest for children (The Leuven Scale and how to use it, 2022).

An additional assessment tool, developed by Scrapstore Play Services in the UK, enables practitioners to assess the play value of public and school playgrounds and support decisions to maximize the quality of play opportunities and choices. This process looks at the changeability of the environment, what natural elements are present, the types of landscape present, and the opportunities for risk, challenge, and self-expression present (Scrapstore, 2017). Adapted from two other established assessment tools in the UK, Simply Play and Play Wales's The First Claim, this process is the most versatile we have identified.

**Strategy #2: Redesign and enhance playgrounds in childcare centers and schools, where children spend most of their time.**

With more than 12 million children younger than age five in some form of childcare in the US (Child Care Aware of America, 2022; NLI Research Brief, n.d.) and nearly 50 million children enrolled in public schools in the US (Public School Enrollment, 2024), childcare settings and schools stand at the center of the solution to bring more child-led outdoor play to children.

In the 2014 Atlantic article *The Overprotected Kid*, Hanna Rosin shares how safety laws, as well as changes in society, have made it difficult for children to play outdoors or unsupervised. Because childcare centers and schools offer the supervision that quells parents' safety concerns, and children have built-in playmates, these settings can be the ideal places to offer children the child-led free play they crave and need for overall health and development.

North Carolina State University's Natural Learning Initiative has taken great strides to train landscape architects, teachers, and early childhood educators in the

evidence-based features of natural play areas that maximize children's movement, engagement, and free play opportunities outside. Several states, including North Carolina, Texas, and South Carolina, now have statewide Outdoor Learning Environment (OLE) initiatives and funding to provide landscape design services and professional development to childcare staff so that directors and teachers understand the benefits of outdoor play and learn the strategies and best practices to incorporate stimulating, engaging free play within their settings. The 12 OLE best practice indicators include a looping, curving pathway for wheeled toys, a grassy open area, sufficient shade structures, a variety of natural, loose materials, edible fruiting plants, and a designated vegetable garden. Although created as a childcare strategy to prevent childhood obesity while exposing children to the natural world, this model can easily be replicated in primary schools and public parks.

The addition of loose parts, natural or man-made materials with no set purpose, such as logs, stones, pots and pans, PVC pipes, rope, or fabric, is one of the best ways to engage children in an outdoor space. The open-ended nature of loose parts enables children to creatively interact with the materials in the way in which they choose, allowing more focus and concentration. Outdoor kitchens, sometimes referred to as 'mud kitchens,' provide a familiar concept to children (and adults) while encouraging child-led play.

Many early learning professionals are providing educators with resources to create their own low-cost loose parts environments outdoors with loose parts. In author and natural playscape designer Rusty Keeler's recent webinar, *Outdoor Loose Parts! Spark Creativity, Problem-Solving, Communication, and Self-Confidence with Loose*

Parts Play (Keeler, 2024), he walked viewers through the value of loose parts in boosting outdoor play and learning, the best kinds of loose parts for outdoor use, and where to find them. Teacher Tom's recent blog post, How to Create a State-of-the-Art Playground for \$200 (Hobson, 2024), suggested materials like sand or a place for digging, shovels and pails, a water pump, and loose parts like gutters, fishing boats, shipping pallets, tires, and plastic fencing.

Involving the children in the design of their outdoor play space is crucial to creating a space in which they will engage and feel a sense of ownership. Design charrettes held for the children, teachers, families, and community stakeholders will ensure their voices are heard and will undoubtedly reveal the elements of play space that are truly desired, as well as that adults and children think quite differently about design.

While barriers exist to this potential solution, successful models are available showing that funding, playground design support, and ongoing professional development for teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders hold promise for incorporating self-directed outdoor play into the places children already spend time: childcare centers and schools.

**Strategy # 3: Increase play awareness and accessibility to safe places to play by hosting community play events.**

Public playgrounds and recreation areas are valuable, important elements within communities that enhance children's and families' health and quality of life. However, many public playgrounds prioritize gross motor play apparatuses and offer few opportunities for children to engage in other types of play. Additionally, children do not



always have access to safe public transport options to reach a playground, and 16% of children under the age of 18 in the US live in poverty, further limiting their access to places to play (Children Poverty Statistics, n.d.). Playgrounds are not meeting the needs of today's children. However, communities can initiate new narratives surrounding play with the addition of "pop-up" play events that borrow elements of adventure playgrounds found in the UK, Asia, and Australia.

Adventure playgrounds provide children with the opportunity to participate in self-directed free play while taking calculated risks and constructing play elements from scratch. It is a space dedicated solely to children's play, where skilled playworkers enable and facilitate the ownership, development, and design of that space – physically, socially, and culturally – by the children playing there (England, 2009). While adventure playgrounds in other countries feature elements such as ziplines, jumping towers, child-built play features, fire, saws, and hammers and nails, this level of risk-taking is uncomfortable for most Americans, and true adventure playgrounds have proven difficult to recreate in the US. Community-organized "pop-up" playgrounds are child-friendly half or full-day events that bring children and adults together to support and advocate for self-directed play using the loose parts that define adventure play.

Pop-up play events can take place in neighborhood parks, existing playgrounds, or on town or city streets. Programs like Play Streets, currently operational in Philadelphia, PA, Cambridge, MA, Portland, OR, Seattle, WA, and other areas, enable hosts to transform their streets into vibrant playgrounds. They can do so by accessing a complimentary kit of pop-up play equipment, making it easy to host engaging block parties.

Beyond the free play benefits to children, community-organized Pop-Up Play events highlight different types of play that go beyond the primarily gross motor play that adults are accustomed to seeing in conventional “fixed structure” playgrounds. Thus, parents, stakeholders, and community leaders may witness socio-dramatic play, communication play, creative play, fantasy play, imaginative play, object play, mastery play, or any of the other 16 Play Types identified by legendary playworker and author Bob Hughes. These play experiences have the potential to expand the awareness of a growing number of adults who may come to see play through the child’s perspective and work to create play environments that support more inclusive and enriching outdoor play (Hughes, 2002). Suzanna Law adds, “Instead of a destination, pop-ups are intended as a driver for long-term change at the grassroots level” (Zedonis, 2016).

A nonprofit based in New York City, Play:groundNYC, started in late 2014 after its founders were motivated by frustration with the city’s restrictions on public play spaces. Turning to the Pop-Up Adventure Play model, they successfully hosted one-day events in parks around Brooklyn, ultimately bringing the concept to Governors Island, where they now operate a permanent adventure playground that has now expanded to offer playworker training (Kantrowitz, 2017).

Other similar community-wide solutions, including Park(ing) Day and Playful Learning Landscapes, are also changing the landscape of public play spaces. Park(ing) Day (<https://www.myparkingday.org>) is a worldwide initiative inviting public participation, where individuals temporarily transform roadside parking spaces into public parks and social hubs. The aim is to advocate for streets that are safer, greener, and more equitable for everyone. Playful Learning Landscapes

(<https://playfullearninglandscapes.com/>) merges architectural ingenuity with education. This model, rooted in research, has undergone thorough evaluation in Philadelphia and various locations worldwide. Early results demonstrate that enhancing public areas like supermarkets, laundromats, parks, libraries, and sidewalks with engaging games fosters cognitive and social growth, shaping behaviors and interactions positively.

Communities that embrace play offer inclusive, safe play spaces while educating the public about the value of child-led play. As a result, they have healthier and happier citizens.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

As Frost (1983) said, "The best playgrounds are never finished, but change and grow with the creative energies of children and playleaders." Frost's wisdom reminds us that children and adults are humans at very different developmental stages with distinct experiences, perspectives, motivations, and intentions. When adults work to understand the complex play lives of children and involve children in the design of play environments as much as possible, this collaborative approach may inspire the creation of easily accessed playgrounds that are stimulating, engaging, address a variety of play types, and better meet children's play needs.

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## The Importance of Choice

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### Problem Statement – Issues

A child's capacity to make meaningful choices in their life is essential to a healthy psyche. Freedom is the key condition under which an individual's autonomy exists and through which a person can exercise their agency and free will (Frankfurt, 1971). Even though freedom is a critical component of choice, most people experience a variety of constraints in their capacity for decision-making, including societal norms, cultural considerations, economic factors, institutional structures, and even psychological attributes that limit or dictate the types of choices and direction in which an individual may proceed (Bandura, 1986; Sen, 1999). The real-world restrictions on a child's choices can create a dearth of genuine pathways for them to exercise their individual freedom and instead create a bubble of pseudo-choices that diminish the child's unique nature.

Due to a variety of limitations and constraints on freedom, children and adolescents today are highly likely to experience anxiety and depression because "without a healthy sense of control, [they] feel powerless and overwhelmed (Stixrud & Johnson, 2018, p. 2). Schools significantly contribute to these limitations by reducing or eliminating opportunities for freedom and for children and adolescents to make meaningful choices. The constraints created by those with power in the educational system are artificial control structures built to maintain a particular order and maximize the efficient delivery of a prescribed curriculum (Stone, 2017). The impact of these control structures on children has been profound. Without choice, students lack engagement and motivation (Reeve & Jang, 2006). Their ability to think critically and develop decision-making skills suffers (Cordova & Lepper, 1996). Without choice, children have few opportunities to play, create, or innovate (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Individualized learning is decreased in a highly controlled environment, and even the school culture and climate suffer due to the disempowerment of both students and teachers (Stipek, 2002).



Conversely, when students have not only a perceived freedom but an actual capacity to make meaningful decisions, they thrive in dynamic ways. Therefore, due to the strong negative impact of a lack of choice and the significant evidence for the numerous benefits of choice, children need to be provided ample opportunities to use their freedom in important ways in their school and home environments. Play is a natural pathway for children to exercise choices and make consequential decisions regarding the nature and direction of their play worlds. Furthermore, if schools can create autonomy-supportive environments that nurture the self-determination of children, then children will have ample opportunities to make real-world decisions based on their interests.

## **Background**

Historically, choice and freedom have been bandied about in philosophical circles. However, after centuries of debate on these concepts, modern scientific investigations have provided substantial evidence to support the numerous healthy benefits of having a sense of control over one's life. In fact, the benefits of choice have been widely studied across the fields of psychology, neuroscience, and education. These benefits fit into broad psychological, physical, and social categories.

When students have choice, they have increased intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). They feel a sense of autonomy and can exercise their agency, which leads to a willingness to consistently engage in tasks while also developing a persistence to persevere through challenging endeavors. Children also increase their interest and enjoyment in activities when they make the choice to participate. This sense of ownership is critical to a child's ability and willingness to engage.

Through choice, children have opportunities to exercise their minds in powerful ways that contribute to healthy cognitive development (Cordova & Lepper, 1996). This would include the benefits of learning to be independent through decision-making, learning to solve problems without intervention from an adult, and developing their ability to self-regulate. Furthermore, children have opportunities to think critically, weigh options, and take responsibility for their decisions. These abilities lead to an increasingly sophisticated readiness to deal with complex challenges in the future.

Children who regularly make real choices also develop healthy emotional regulation and exhibit higher levels of self-esteem, confidence, and satisfaction. The ability to choose also leads to lower levels of stress. Stixrud and Johnson (2018) suggest that having a sense of freedom is the antidote to stress and that a child's agency is perhaps the most critical factor in their happiness and well-being.

The freedom to make choices in school environments significantly contributes to active engagement, leading to increased academic performance and achievement. Furthermore, when children make choices in the classroom that reflect their interests and personal preferences, they exhibit an increased intrinsic motivation and higher levels of effort. Ownership in the learning process can also significantly improve a child's understanding of concepts and the retention and application of the material (Stone, 2020).

Choices provide opportunities for children to consider the perspectives of others, build and respect boundaries, and negotiate their place in a social world. Through social interactions, children learn to cooperate, communicate across differences, and develop empathy (Anderson & Cameron, 2023). They learn that their choices impact others and figure out how to navigate their independence while also learning how to respect the agency of those around them.

When children have the freedom to move, they often choose to climb, dance, explore, run, and play physical games. These choices can lead to healthy physical development and help maintain physical fitness. However, schools often maintain strict environments that expect children to sit still for hours, depriving them of their natural proclivity for physical activity. Many teachers take away recess as a form of punishment, but recess is critical to a child's play, physical development, and decision-making capacity.

Kohn (1993) suggests that a healthy educational environment is built on student autonomy, where children can construct understandings through personally interesting and relevant activities under their control. However, schools predominately deprive children of any real freedom because of the high-stakes, high-pressure system of education that the federal government has imposed. Teachers either lack the understanding of the value of choices or deliberately deprive their students of any

opportunities to make meaningful decisions because their job performance is tied to a high-pressure system that expects results on a test. This atmosphere creates a vacuum of student choice and fosters a very rigid, prescriptive environment that emphasizes the efficient delivery of a standards-based curriculum.

In many teacher-directed classrooms, the goal is to cover and pace the curriculum so students can meet the standards and score well on a test. Because of this overarching objective, schools expect children to conform and obey, which evidences the structures for control, and a child's freedom to make decisions becomes obsolete (Kohn, 2008). Furthermore, "school has taken over children's lives in even more insidious ways. The school system has directly and indirectly, often unintentionally, fostered an attitude in society that children learn and progress primarily by doing tasks that are directed and evaluated by adults, and that children's own activities are wasted time" (Gray, 2013, p. 8). Due to the dominant control structures, inflexibility of the curriculum, and the high-stakes nature of our education system, teachers often cave to the pressure and choose to dominate their students' lives at school through homogenized activities (Abeles, 2016; Kohn, 2008). Teachers may try to provide choices for their students where possible, but the result is overwhelmingly the suppression of choice.

Schools often give the appearance that they provide choices for children, but these choices are typically meaningless and provide no real benefit. For example, a teacher may provide the "choice" for children to pick the color of their folder for a research project on animals. This may appease the teacher's conscience that they provided a choice. However, it does not allow the child to make an important real-world decision with real consequences that reflect the child's understanding and interests. In this scenario, the child probably does not have a say in the content, methods, presentation, or project assessment, which could mean the differences between engagement and disengagement, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and authentic learning and superficial memorization. Furthermore, teachers often provide "choices" like finishing their worksheets or having to stay in from recess. Kohn (1993) describes this as a "pseudo-choice," which often appears as something contrived and sometimes is attached to punishment. Kohn contrasts these instances of "pseudo-choice" with real

choices where children have opportunities to “generate different possibilities than merely to select one possibility from among those that have been set before them” (Kohn, 1993, p.15). Pseudo-choices do not provide the same benefits of a volitional decision-making process with real weight behind the impact of that decision.

### **Appropriate Approaches/Strategies**

It is important to note that even though schools preclude play opportunities, it is the primary mode for children to determine their paths, make decisions, and exercise a sense of control through their imagination. In contrast, the real world often presents any number of constrictions on freedom. This is why play is such an important factor in a child’s healthy development. The play world is the only world where there are unlimited possibilities, and the child can freely exercise choice. The key components of authentic play include intrinsic motivation and the fact that the play is freely chosen (Johnson et al., 2005). Children choose to play because it is satisfying; their play is process-driven, not goal-oriented, which frees children to explore different possibilities actively and leads them into creative thinking (Stone, 2017).

Adults often want to intervene and control play with an educational objective in mind. Even with the best intentions, this is wholly inappropriate as play must be self-chosen and self-directed. Stone and Burriss (2019) assert that “controlling learning through linear tasks will limit the rich discoveries children will make in a play environment” (p. 213). Children’s play and the freedom that comes with it is of significant value in and of itself. There are many benefits to the freedom and infinite possibilities (and subsequent choices) that come through a child’s play. Whitebread et al. (2009) suggest that play is a critical factor in developing children’s problem-solving skills and creativity, which require substantial levels of metacognitive and self-regulatory skills. Moreover, Whitebread et al. note that these skills are “crucially important in the development of academic skills” (p. 40). They conclude that “children’s play makes a significant contribution to their development as learners, and that this has implications for the quality of their thinking, problem-solving and creativity” (p. 41).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) represents theoretical support for providing choices in the classroom (King & Howard, 2016). The theory holds to the idea that

autonomy, competence, and relatedness are the most important factors in increasing intrinsic motivation and self-engagement in activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Furthermore, when children have autonomy, are motivated to develop competence, and can see the relatedness of content through interesting, relevant contexts, they are more likely to exhibit enhanced performance, a strong ability to persist through challenges and be more creative (CSDT, 2024). Kleitsch and Kulinna (2022), when examining Self-Determination Theory through children's choices during physical education, found that as children become more intrinsically motivated, they experience more autonomy. Additionally, they discovered that when children are given choices (i.e., equipment, experiences, playmates), their attitude, enjoyment, and physical activity increase. When children choose the games they want to play and the level of competition, they play more, feel more competent, and experience greater enjoyment from their chosen games. Therefore, autonomy, or the ability to choose, enhances participation. When the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met, the child enjoys greater intrinsic motivation, interest, creativity, imagination, and well-being (Hunter-Doniger, 2021). Play, of course, is a significant source for these important needs to be met. Conklin (2014), in her research with middle school children, found that play offered students choice and self-direction and increased their imaginative creations, interest, and joy. These benefits are typically not seen in controlling environments that offer only pseudo-choices or no choice at all.

In relation to the Self-Determination Theory, Autonomy-Supportive environments support children's psychological need to exercise their free will and self-endorsement of their freely chosen activities (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). This means that teachers who promote Autonomy-Supportive environments intentionally design classrooms to foster meaningful choices that will allow for children's satisfaction and increase motivation. This does not mean that the classroom has become entirely permissive; it is just that children have the capacity to make real decisions with minimized pressure and demands. There are many great benefits to this approach. Kamii (1994) suggests, "Children who are confident about their ability to think and are autonomous and inventive are more likely to develop intellectually in the long run than those who lack confidence, are passive, and are concerned mainly about pleasing the teacher (p. 188).

Pink (2009) believes that “people-oriented” toward autonomy and intrinsic motivation have higher self-esteem, better interpersonal relationships, and greater general well-being than those who are extrinsically motivated” (p.78). Pink also asserts that “the opposite of autonomy is control” which leads to compliance; however, “autonomy leads to engagement” (p. 110).

Autonomy-supportive environments in practice will allow students to make choices about what they are learning (i.e., the curriculum), how they are learning, how they engage, and how they interact with others. One potential approach that accomplishes these goals would be a choice-based center environment that allows students to choose between many possibilities (or invent their own), engage on their own terms, and choose with whom they work. This freedom within the environment allows for authentic play, meaningful collaboration, and active inquiry that is rooted in a child’s curiosity. Essentially, children can become the primary stakeholders in their learning process, taking ownership of how they engage with the content they have chosen to explore (Lyons, 2024; Robinson, 2015; Wasserman, 1992). This is a powerful individual process that cannot be ignored in classrooms.

### **Conclusion/Recommendations**

As children are continually deprived of meaningful choices and precluded from authentically playing during school hours, the negative impacts of this void of freedom are quite clear. Children are stressed, experience anxiety and depression, and lack the motivation and engagement to perform well in school (Abeles, 2016; Strauss, 2016; Robinson, 2015). Furthermore, they experience stunted development with decreased cognitive abilities, including critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and innovation. Conversely, if children were suddenly provided ample opportunities to exercise their freedom and agency in school, they would experience a vast increase in intrinsic motivation, persistence, and creative capacity. Children with the freedom to make important choices in the classroom will be highly engaged, develop a propensity for a life-long love of learning, and experience a healthier overall well-being. Teachers should build choice-driven environments that capitalize on the need for autonomy, competence,

and relatedness while also recognizing that play is a significant factor in a free classroom where children can be self-directed.

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## Play As A Biological Necessity

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- [Nature-Made and Manufactured Playgrounds: The Need For Diversity In Play Environments](#)
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## Art as a Vehicle for Learning: The Necessity of Creative Environments Through the Early Years

Jessica Borowets

### Introduction

In early childhood education, a gradual shift is happening towards acknowledging the importance of nurturing young minds through a “whole child” curriculum. There seems to be a buzz about the significance of all aspects of a child's development beyond academic achievement. Parents and educators are finally considering the overall well-being and growth of the child. However, a lack of understanding persists regarding the crucial role of art and creative environments in facilitating deeper and more meaningful learning experiences during the early years. Art is seen as an extracurricular activity and is often confused with product-focused crafts. A rich environment is overlooked as an ideal tool for a child to construct meaning and understanding about their world. The results are a restricted curriculum and ho-hum classrooms that negate the needs of young children, ignoring the potential of a material-rich environment and what it can offer for child development.

Children learn with all their senses. If we have studied play or even watched children play for years, we know this to be true. Most of us are familiar with the work of early childhood theorists.

Jean Piaget, Vygotsky, and Maria Montessori have documented the significance of play and the importance of experiential and hands-on learning in children's development. According to Piaget (1952), children construct knowledge through interactions with the environment. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the role of social interactions and cultural tools in learning. Montessori (1912) advocated for a child-centric approach, allowing children to discover through self-directed exploration. What is missing is the use of art and creative mediums as a vehicle for development and learning.

Art provides the necessary avenue for children to go deep in learning about the world around them. A creative space fosters wonder and awe, which generates a spark for curiosity and learning. Children with unbridled access to materials they can touch, smell, manipulate, influence, transform, build with, make marks with, and hold are given opportunities to learn through various methods and diverse elements. By engaging in self-directed exploration of art materials, children express their unique identities and cultivate autonomy, problem-solving abilities, and critical thinking skills. In an artistic environment, they uncover basic scientific principles such as color, gravity, weight, light, counting, chemical reactions, and density. All children need to learn to engage in self-chosen, sensory-rich experiences based on each child's developmental progress.

Research indicates that exploring art materials stimulates various brain areas, promoting neural connections and enhancing cognitive development. Exposure to art and the opportunity to impact their own environment gives children what they need to grow spiritually, emotionally, developmentally, and socially (Gardner, 1983). Despite these benefits, art education is often marginalized in early childhood settings, overshadowed by a focus on academic achievement and assessment. Since it isn't easy to assess wonder, awe, and curiosity, artistic exploration is dumbed down to being just for fun. An example of this scenario is the development of an assessment in a creative atmosphere that mistakenly trivializes the art as a grade that assesses the product, talent, or technique.

To address the necessity of creative environments through the early years, educators and curriculum makers must continue to embrace a holistic approach and simultaneously integrate art into every aspect of a child's routine. There needs to be an understanding of what art is and how it differs from crafts and adult-directed projects. We must reconsider our early learning environments. The child's space should be rich with creative materials, exciting objects, loose parts, natural materials, artistic books, supplies that aren't toys, and items that may have a touch of history so that the child can have a sense of themselves in time. In a word, their surroundings should be meaningful to their daily experiences, engaging, and always strive to build on prior

knowledge, deepening children's understanding of the world around them.

Here are some strategies to integrate art and creativity into children's learning spaces:

- Integrated Curriculum: Children can explore different subjects through drawing, building, experimenting, mixing materials, or discussing works of art by their peers or famous artists.
- Child-centered: Allow the child to lead in play. Prepare the environment with the intention of having them explore materials and mediums at their leisure. Respect each child's interests, preferences, and stage of development. Provide open-ended art materials and opportunities for self-chosen exploration. Assume that the child might have ideas beyond what you, the adult, can add to a plan.
- Process Over Product: Shift the focus from outcome to prove the purpose of demonstrating their learning to the adult to the journey of discovery and reflection. Celebrate effort, risk, and learning from mistakes.
- Sensory-Rich Experiences: Ensure that the room is filled with awe-inspiring, sensory-rich materials that provide meaning and curiosity, such as enhancing the space with older objects from a different time period that they can investigate, objects that connect them to the real world like real tools, containers, instruments, equipment, loose parts, and books. Promote multi-sensory learning with water, sand, clay, wire, paint, glue, dough, slime, paper, light boxes and projectors, essential oils added to water and dough.
- Cultural Relevance: Speak to each child with the materials prepared in the environment. Integrate art, cultural objects, and traditions to foster awareness and respect. Explore artwork from various time-periods and ethnicities. Get children thinking about individual differences and being citizens of the world rather than their immediate surroundings.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, art and an artistic environment serve as a powerful vehicle for learning in a child's early years by engaging them in meaningful experiences, provoking thought, and promoting overall development. By embracing a child-centric approach, integrating art into the curriculum, and keeping an intentionally interesting, inspiring space, the learning process can be enriched in many ways. Spreading the word and advocating for child-initiated play is a way to engage policy-makers, teachers, and parents in recognizing why play is critical to development. If there are more advocates for including art in early childhood education, adults can cease limiting children's potential with their own agenda and expected outcomes. In doing so, we will support every child's potential, preparing them to thrive in this increasingly complex and interconnected world.

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## **Redefining Basic Needs: Eliminating Systemic Barriers to Ensure Every Child Can Thrive**

By Emily Clark, M.Ed & Kisa Marx

### **Introduction**

*Picture it: a learning environment filled with the hum of eager young minds, each overflowing with potential and curiosity. At the pulse of this vibrant space are educators dedicated to shaping the future generation. Their passion radiates through every lesson and interaction as they strive to ignite the flames of knowledge within each child.*

*Yet, amidst this bustling scene of promise, a subplot unfolds—a narrative of struggle and resilience, often hidden in the shadows. Like a whisper in a crowded room, the system designed for belonging inadvertently fails to meet the diverse needs of every child. And for those unseen children, the effects reverberate like the roar of a lion in the silence.*

### **Meeting Children's Diverse Needs**

Hardworking teachers, driven by love and dedication, find themselves unwittingly complicit in a system that fails to address the unique needs of children from the global majority. Their lack of cultural responsiveness and anti-bias competence leaves them ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of their students' experiences. Consequently, a disheartening reality emerges: the very institutions intended to nurture and educate our children may inadvertently contribute to a preschool-to-prison pipeline, perpetuating cycles of inequality and injustice.

Regardless of their background or circumstances, every child yearns to be seen, heard, and valued. However, implicit bias often clouds our perceptions, leading to the unjust scrutiny, policing, and punishment of children simply for being who they are. It's a stark reminder that inequity permeates every aspect of our society, from the classroom to the corridors of power.

As we embark on this journey to address the inequity of basic needs impacting children of the global majority, we must advocate for systemic change at every level. Our families deserve access to high-quality care, irrespective of their income. While all children suffer the effects of low-quality childcare and early childhood education, these effects are intensified for children impacted by toxic stress, racism, and economic adversity, and these children are less likely to have access to high-quality care (Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2015). Our educators must undergo comprehensive training in early childhood education and development, grounded in principles of cultural responsiveness and equity, to ensure that, above all, our children have an inherent right to safety, joy, and a sense of belonging in their learning environments.

In this white paper, we will explore the multifaceted challenges children from marginalized communities face, shedding light on the systemic barriers hindering their growth and development to catalyze meaningful action toward a future where every child's basic needs are recognized and fiercely protected.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (Maslow, 1943) teaches us that we must first ensure that our fundamental needs are met before we can fully thrive. These needs encompass our physiological requirements, such as food, shelter, water, and human warmth, as well as our need for safety—both physical and emotional. Moving up the hierarchy, we encounter our need for belonging, the yearning to feel at home, accepted, and valued within our social circles. Beyond that lies our need for esteem, the desire for autonomy, and recognition of our worth. At the pinnacle of Maslow's hierarchy is self-actualization—a space where we can fully realize our potential, pursue our passions, and find fulfillment.

Our work is framed by Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, as described by Bhattacharya (2019), highlighting the need to move away from a "banking model" of



education in which children are empty vessels that educators simply need to fill. This type of education can never support marginalized people's empowerment because it removes them from their own equation. Friere's "problem-posing" model, in which children and their communities question and reflect upon how inequitable systems of power impact them and begin to dismantle them, provides opportunities to truly work with marginalized children and families rather than for them (Bhattacharya, 2019).

As we strive for progress and development, it's imperative that we pause to reflect on the fundamental needs of our most vulnerable population: children. Maslow's hierarchy of needs emphasizes safety and belonging as essential prerequisites for human flourishing. Yet, as we delve into the intricate fabric of child development, it becomes apparent that many of our children, particularly those from marginalized communities, are denied even the most basic of necessities.

## **Problem Statement**

When high-quality care and education are synonymous with privilege, the concepts of empathy, compassion, safety, joy, trust, confidence, and possibility become extravagances for those lucky enough to afford it. Yet the human right to these basic needs is not an indulgence like an overpriced cup of coffee. These are basic needs, yet when our basic needs symbolize luxury accessible only to a select few, the premium for high-quality care education is prohibitively expensive.

As a widely accepted framework, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs becomes problematic when seen and implemented through a lens of equality. On paper, the model is seen as universally applicable. However, there exists a significant disparity in the fulfillment of basic needs for health, safety, and belonging among marginalized populations and the black and brown children of the global majority. This discrepancy perpetuates cycles of deprivation, social injustice, and systemic barriers that hinder holistic development and well-being. To address this, we must shift our perspective and

view these fundamental needs through a lens of equity, with the aim of meeting the essential needs of every child, regardless of their background or circumstances.

### **Inequities Impact Neurodevelopment**

The inequities that young children face in achieving health, safety, and belonging begin before birth, and they start in the brain. Through the work of neuroscientists, educators now have concrete evidence to shine a light on how children in the early years develop and the importance of the environments that we use to cultivate their learning. The early childhood years are a peak time for rapid brain development; in fact, by kindergarten, a child's brain is at 90% of its adult weight (Finocchiaro, 2016). The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016) highlights how early experiences create a powerful blueprint for a child's brain, making early childhood a particularly vulnerable and important time. Yet not all children's brains are given what they need to develop optimally in these critical years, and children of the global majority are particularly vulnerable to adverse outcomes through systemic racism and injustice rampant in early care and education systems.

When young children lack supportive adults and are forced to cope with stressful environments, they become more prone to developing self-protection responses and less likely to be motivated toward long-term goals and future achievements (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2018). We often call these self-protective responses a reactive state.

When a child is in a reactive state, the part of the brain responsible for things like breathing, thinking, anger, and fear is activated. This activation triggers an alarm response, sensing that the body is in imminent danger, and fight, flight, freeze, or fawn ensues. Reactive states can be triggered by neglect of needs: physiological, safety, belonging, and self-esteem. Reactive states can also be triggered by unresponsiveness, amplified distress, and toxic shame. In a classroom, you need no more than one example: time out. A child who receives excessive timeouts is constantly isolated from

their caregiver and classmates; their distress may be heightened if they are either sent to time out while dysregulated or become dysregulated because of it, and they are saddled with the shame of being ostracized from the group.

This dysregulation in a young child may look like explosive big feelings, biting, physical aggression, yelling, verbal aggression, and crying. It may also look like withdrawal. To clarify, we're not referring to children reacting due to neurological or biological conditions. Instead, we're addressing situations where a child is in a reactive state because their amygdala is hijacked by toxic stress in their environment. Recognizing and understanding these environmental factors is crucial in providing the necessary support for children to feel safe, supported, and thrive. Emotions drive our behavior, and safety drives our emotions. It's crucial to remember that memory, emotion, thinking, and learning are intertwined and indistinguishable.

Caring and supportive adults minimize young children's responses to fear and anxiety and help them develop appropriate responses to stress, enabling self-regulation and executive functioning skills. With this understanding, educators play a pivotal role in recognizing and addressing reactive states in children. Educators can help quell a child's reactive state by creating nurturing and supportive environments that foster emotional regulation and optimal development.

Acknowledging the broader context within which these skills operate, especially concerning executive function, is essential. Executive function skills encompass a range of abilities vital for children's success in school and beyond, including agency, autonomy, risk-taking, and problem-solving. However, it's crucial to recognize that deficits in executive function skills can be a significant pressure point for educators, particularly among Black children and children of the global majority in our educational systems. Studies have shown that Black children, often facing systemic challenges and inequities, may encounter obstacles in developing and demonstrating these crucial skills within traditional educational environments. Unstructured play, specifically during

outdoor learning, emerges as a promising avenue for nurturing executive function skills in all children, fostering resilience, confidence, and self-efficacy.

According to Iruka (2022), interactions with caregivers in high-quality ECEC settings play a critical role in supporting the healthy neurodevelopment of young children. The quality of these relationships has far-reaching implications for future achievements in school and life. Supporting young children's neurodevelopment requires prioritizing support of the holistic needs of the communities of care around each child. Caring, safe, and predictable interactions with the primary caregivers in a child's life provide the unique opportunity to offer children truly individualized learning experiences to enhance children's brain development (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2015; Finocchiaro, 2016; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2018).

### **Inequities in Early Childhood Care and Education Settings**

A comprehensive body of evidence has shown that high-quality ECCE environments have numerous clear and valuable benefits to enhance children's resilience and lessen the impact of systemic inequities on marginalized children, yet these are the very children significantly who are less likely to receive these supports (Simpson et al., 2017; Iruka, 2022). The intersection of racism and poverty creates a multitude of barriers blocking young children from empowering ECCE opportunities. The Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University (2015) stated clearly, "Reducing or eliminating serious adversities in the lives of children and families is the best way to prevent the negative effects of stress on development" (pg. 22).

Black children are less likely to have access to ECCE compared to their white peers, and they are less likely to receive high-quality ECCE when they do access care (Iruka, 2022). Even when looking at Head Start programs alone, Black children are more likely to be in 'low to moderate' quality rated centers than their white peers despite making up more than 1/3 of Head Start enrollment. (Iruka, 2022). Consider this striking

statistic from the National Prevention Science Coalition to Improve Lives: while Black boys make up only 20% of preschool enrollment, they account for a staggering 50% of preschool expulsions. This jarring disparity underscores the pervasive inequities that persist within our early childhood education system. Every year, approximately 17,000 children are expelled from preschool, their childhood overshadowed by the harsh reality of exclusion and discrimination. What's even more alarming is that the average age of these children is a mere 3.3 years old, highlighting the deeply troubling nature of these expulsions.

Poverty is a multifaceted concept that has negative implications for young children's health and development across a wide range of developmental domains. In the United States, more than 1 in 5 children live in poverty (Simpson et al., 2017). The research of Simpson et al. (2017) uncovered that practitioners may be 'poverty-blind'- in the same way that white educators often label themselves 'color-blind'- and negate the lived experiences of children in poverty by enacting attitudes and practices that do not allow for the complexity of their needs.

Our beliefs serve as the bridge connecting the mind (feelings) and the body (senses). As we navigate the unique paths of our lives, every conversation, environment, and person we encounter, along with the relationships that form from those interactions, becomes encoded in our working memory. For the children in our care, a childhood spent navigating systemic injustices with caregivers who are struggling to do the same often leads to a focus on survival rather than growth. Consequently, the belief emerges that the environment is stressful, and as previously discussed, learning is compromised. This is especially true for children of the global majority, who may experience systemic barriers to accessing supportive environments and nurturing relationships.

As educators, we must be responsive to the individual needs of every child in our care, every client, and every family. This includes understanding and addressing the basic needs of each individual, such as safety, belonging, and esteem, particularly for

children of the global majority who may face additional challenges in accessing these necessities.

Relationships are the tie that binds a transactional place of business to its clients and creates community. We are more than an exchange of service for currency. We do more than care for the days of children; we are friends, chosen family, safekeepers, and counselors. Centering connection looks like finding different ways to collaborate with your families to ensure their basic needs are met, creating a foundation for meaningful relationships and a thriving community, especially for children of the global majority who often experience systemic barriers to accessing these fundamental supports.

Early childhood care and education requires social justice work to meet the needs of all young children. Seltzer & O'Brien (2022) argue that disrupting systemic racism in ECEC settings is a 'critical need' and yet an area that has been continually minimized and downplayed by color-blind policies, practices, and laws that serve to "uphold current racial inequalities." ECEC settings play a pivotal role in young children's lives during a critical time in their development; therefore, evaluating "children's access to and experience in" these settings to promote excellent outcomes- particularly for vulnerable children of color- is paramount (Iruka, 2022). Children of marginalized communities require our explicit support and attention to their unique needs and abilities so that they can thrive in our care. When children feel valued, supported, and connected, they are better equipped to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially, breaking free from the generational cycles of poverty and inequity. This is the core of our work, and it cannot wait.

### **Communities of Care**

Despite differences in age and background, the essence of human needs remains consistent. Caregivers, whether parents, teachers, or mentors, cannot effectively provide the nurturing environment that children so desperately long for if their needs are neglected. Just as children require food, rest, and emotional validation to

thrive, caregivers must also feel valued, seen, and heard to provide the warmth, safety, and sense of belonging children need to flourish. The well-being of early educators is paramount and cannot be denied, as it directly influences the quality of early childhood education. Neglecting the basic needs of the early educator can compromise their ability to effectively fulfill their duties, perpetuating deprivation within the educational setting.

Similar to the emphasis on reducing adversities for children and families, it is imperative for institutions and policymakers to recognize and address the challenges faced by educators, particularly the risk of burnout. According to Silver and Zinsser (2020), "When teachers perceive their center's climate to be positive and supportive, they not only hold more positive attitudes toward teaching, but the quality of their care improves" (pg. 1136). By providing adequate support and resources, such as professional development opportunities, access to materials, and fostering supportive work environments, we prioritize the well-being of educators. Prioritizing collective care underscores the importance of caregivers feeling valued and supported advocates for creating inclusive and supportive environments for educators. It provides the support needed to feel valued within this profession.

When nurturing a community, we are more than providers; we are interpreters tasked to see beyond behavior and translate what that behavior is communicating. By prioritizing connection and meeting the basic needs of every individual within our community, we not only foster a sense of belonging and security but also interrupt the cycle of deprivation- for children and their caregivers. According to Roberts (2015), our values "can either promote or exclude, include or marginalize, and create a society that supports or challenges successful development of individuals as self-actualizing with innate rights" (2015). Belonging is not just a fundamental human need but a powerful force for positive change, transforming lives and communities for the better. Effective and inclusive ECE requires transformative action from educators and communities to actively oppose inequalities and eliminate the impacts of systemic disadvantages (Roberts, 2015).

Every family desires high-quality care for their children, but the cost proves prohibitive for many, leading them to settle for what fits within their budget. Despite the genuine love many caregivers hold for children, a lack of expertise in child development, coupled with inadequate knowledge of culturally responsive and anti-bias practices, inadvertently contributes to funneling the children they care for into the preschool-to-prison nexus. Furthermore, every child yearns to be seen, heard, and valued, yet pervasive implicit biases subject them to scrutiny, policing, and unjust punishment simply for being themselves. Our families must have the opportunity to gain access to high-quality care regardless of income, our educators must receive comprehensive training in early childhood education and development, and our children must be afforded the fundamental right to physical and emotional safety, joy, and a sense of belonging.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the journey towards a more equitable and compassionate future for early childhood education demands a paradigm shift away from the deficit model towards humanizing pedagogies that center the genius, justice, love, and humanity in our children. Hardworking teachers, driven by love and dedication, often find themselves unwittingly complicit in a system that fails to address the unique needs of children from the global majority. The lack of cultural responsiveness and anti-bias competence leaves these educators ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of their students' experiences, inadvertently contributing to cycles of inequality and injustice.

We've been conditioned by societal norms to view the world through a lens fractured by deficits, triggering reactive decisions based on fear instead of what is informed by the child's development. This is particularly pronounced in the lives of Black children, who often face compounded challenges due to systemic racism and inequities.

Dr. Ghouldy Muhammad's call for humanizing pedagogies resonates deeply. It emphasizes the need to recognize the intrinsic value of every child and the collective responsibility to provide high-quality care for all families, regardless of income.



Advocating for systemic change at every level, we must ensure that every child has the inherent right to safety, joy, and a sense of belonging in their learning environments.

As we strive to meet the collective needs of early educators, children, and families, comprehensive training in early childhood education and development is essential. Every educator deserves the support and resources necessary to nurture the holistic development of children, ensuring their physical and emotional well-being.

By embracing these principles and committing to a culture of compassion and equity, we lay the foundation for a future where every child can flourish and reach their full potential. Let us move forward together, guided by the values of inclusivity, empathy, and love, toward a brighter tomorrow for early childhood education.

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## Nature-Based and Manufactured Playgrounds: The Need for Diversity in Play Environments

Bri Marr OTD, OTR/L

### Introduction

Although many may agree that natural environments can provide rich experiences for all ages, access to green/blue spaces or open natural areas is inequitable. Rigolon (2016) explicitly identifies inequities in park acreage, amenities, safety, and proximity when comparing low-SES neighborhoods with more affluent neighborhoods in urban settings. Acknowledging the right of every person, especially children, to have equitable access to quantity, quality, and diversity of play experiences must also include natural play spaces (nature-based playgrounds, green spaces, blue spaces, etc.). With this belief in mind, we ask, what is the quantifiable value in increasing access to these diverse play experiences and environments? Why does that matter?

As an occupational therapist, I agree with Aota's definition. I recognize play as the primary occupation of childhood and define play as "intrinsically motivated, internally controlled, and freely chosen" (AOTA, 2020). The belief in free play expands this definition to mean that it is a right for all people, especially children. Play exists on a continuum of freedom for the child. Froebel, the Father of Kindergarten, supported child-led play experiences with caregivers there to gently guide or support, as explained in *The Education of Man* (1826). Free play is the concept of child-directed, autonomous, open-ended play experiences that align with the ideas of children being competent beings and deserving of play opportunities and environments that support healthy development (CAPN, 2018). Free, undirected, risky play enhances confidence, resiliency, self-advocacy, and the ability to work together with peers, resolve conflicts, negotiate, and share (Keeler, 2020).

### The Benefits of Nature Play

The environment in which we choose to partake in activities and occupations significantly impacts our participation, performance, and satisfaction. The same is true for our play experiences. This is based on the Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) model (Law et al., 1996), which depicts the interconnectedness of the individual, the environment, and the occupation. This can be seen when considering how people respond to work-from-home,

work-from-cafe, or work-in-office. It is also seen in the environments in which children play and how their experiences differ between these environments. The existing literature shows that natural spaces are therapeutically beneficial when the play environments foster risky, imaginative, and connection-based play. Nature-based play and interventions benefit individuals with physical, mental, emotional, or developmental disabilities (Coventry, 2021) and even their families (Peterson et al., 2020). Nature play also presents an excellent environment for sensory-rich experiences (Yogman et al., 2018) that can allow children to explore meeting their own needs and thresholds for regulation.

To address the questions posed at the beginning of this essay, a study was conducted at Bernheim Research Forest and Arboretum during the summer of 2023 through a digital caregiver survey (Marr, 2023). This survey asked caregivers to describe their children's play experiences in nature-based playgrounds and typical, manufactured playgrounds and how caregivers choose where their children play. The survey was open for 50 days, obtaining 75 completed survey responses from caregiver participants, including data on more than 125 children. These responses provided significant data to advocate for diverse play experiences, specifically nature-based experiences.

The most common satisfaction rating for caregivers at a nature-based playground was "very satisfied," 73% of caregivers were more satisfied with their child's experience at a nature-based playground than typical playgrounds. The circumplex model of affect was used to define negative and positive emotions based on valence levels (Posner et al., 2005). The most common emotion following play at a nature-based playground was "happy," while "tired" was the most common for a typical, manufactured playground. When looking at the duration of play, 58% of caregivers report their child spending more time engaged at a nature-based playground than typical playgrounds, with some caregivers reporting playing 8x longer or more. Nature-based playgrounds were found to better support all provided play patterns and skill development categories. The most supported play pattern at a nature-based playground was creative problem-solving. Lastly, "child's preference" was the most frequently selected response when caregivers were asked how they choose where to play, as well as "distance from home," "nature-based playground," and "caregiver preference" (listed in order of prevalence).

## Conclusion

So again, what is the quantifiable value in increasing access to diverse play experiences and environments? As stated above, children express to their families that they prefer play experiences at a nature-based playground, which influences caregivers' selection of play environments for their children. Children stay engaged in play longer at nature-based playgrounds than at typical, manufactured playgrounds. Caregivers feel that their children's play development is better supported in this environment. They see significantly less negative valence emotions in their children following a play session at a nature-based playground.

When looking at this data through a thematic lens, a trend emerges. Children prefer their play experiences in nature-based playgrounds as this environment offers them more freedom and autonomy. It is continuously adaptable to support the creation of new play experiences with natural materials, loose parts, and parts and encourages creative problem-solving and vital social interactions. The children are engaged in this play environment for longer. They are leaving the play experiences with decreased negative emotions because they have used the natural aspects provided to create their own fulfilling play experience that meets their desires and needs. So, why does this matter? With longer and richer play experiences, children are deriving more benefits from their play physically, mentally, socially, emotionally, and developmentally. As an occupational therapist, I recognize that children are maximizing their participation, performance, and satisfaction in their primary occupation, play.

This is important as it provides a backbone for advocating for equitable quality, quantity, and diversity in play environments and experiences for all. This data emphasizes the importance of accessibility to these experiences by addressing barriers: physical, social-emotional, financial, and geographic. When we can acknowledge the value of play for all and the value of diversity and equity in play, we can work meaningfully as play advocates, play facilitators, and community teammates.

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## How Does The Rhythm Of The Day Set The Stage For Play

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### Introduction

For those familiar with Waldorf Education, you will know about the "breathing in" and "breathing out" periods in a school day. These terms simply mean there are times throughout the day for 'quiet' activities and additionally for 'louder' more physical activities.

When there is a predictable routine in school or home life, there is a flow to the day that children come to expect, and that feels natural and safe, the same way it does for all animals; we have periods of rest and periods of activity, which is part of the natural Circadian Rhythm and if we can follow this natural rhythm and allow children the freedom to rest when needed and to be active/play when needed children can grow and develop without the stress of being rushed from activity to activity for the sake of "learning" or to meet an educational goal that is meant to be a measurable learning outcome.

### The Rhythm of the Day

We respect childhood's natural pace when we set the stage for play each day and allow periods of unstructured free play during a child's day. In addition, we are providing an opportunity for children to release the natural bursts of physical energy that is within their bodies. Educators can set the stage for play each day by providing a familiar flow or rhythm to their day that children will come to expect. It does not need to be rigid to specific time slots but rather to a natural flow each day so that children will come to know their day-to-day schedule. As children age, grow, and develop, their play will also look different; however, we must take a stand and acknowledge and advocate

that they need periods of play as a human right throughout the entire span of childhood into adulthood.

## Conclusion

As adults, we continue to play in ways that look different but are nonetheless crucial for our physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. A work/life balance is one that is harmonious with periods of rest/work/play. Humans cannot only exist for the sake of producing and working, or we end up with feelings of 'dis-ease' and with physical and mental health issues/'disease.' In addition, research has shown that after a period of play, children and adults can more easily focus on a period of schoolwork. Research has shown that even a ten-minute break from schoolwork can reset the mind to recover from cognitive fatigue.

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## Risk Vs. Hazards in Play

Peter Dargatz

### Introduction

Risk and hazards are often considered synonymous. They are not. In fact, they couldn't be more different. Hazards need to be identified and avoided, while risks are meant to be encouraged and celebrated.

Let's take a look at hazards first. Hazards tend to be dangerous to individuals or the environment. Hazards are often hard to assess and need to be avoided in play. With common sense and proper planning, hazardous play can be minimized, and play can be as safe as necessary but not as safe as possible.

### Risks Vs Hazards

Risk is everywhere and in every situation. Everyone must understand and value risk. Frequently considered a dirty word in education, schools often try (and fail) to eradicate and eliminate risk in the name of safety. But if you ask me, safety requires risk. Let me explain. Risk is everywhere. It's impossible (and irresponsible) to eliminate every risk for children. Risk is necessary, and its benefits far outweigh any drawbacks. Adults understandably feel the need to protect our children. But even with the best intentions, paving the way for every child's move does not equate to protecting them. In fact, sometimes, it can prove the opposite because when children grow up overly protected, their instinctual ability to assess and avoid actual hazards becomes compromised. By nature, children are risk-takers. They intentionally seek out risk, even in the structured and organized plastic playgrounds so commonly seen in parks and schools nationwide. Taking away children's ability to take risks by bubble-wrapping everything may actually lead them to pay less attention to their play, thus leading to carelessness and, ultimately, more injuries. Research suggests that children get injured in these "safer" playgrounds *because* the element of risk has been taken away (Wood & Leichter-Saxby, 2018). For example, children who fall on the soft, spongy surfaces of

today's playgrounds never experience the consequences of falling. Besides interfering with a child's understanding of safety, eliminating all risks within the play can also eliminate their creativity, challenge, and discovery. Without appropriate opportunities for risk, children may engage in unsafe activities that move from risky to hazardous to get the sense of adventure their bodies and minds crave. We take away that sense of adventure from children when we "protect" them with "safer" playground equipment.

Teachers and caregivers can help children regain crucial risk assessment skills to avoid hazards and hazardous actions with simple expectations, guidance, and observation. Even with this guidance, adults often undervalue a child's self-assessment skills to "protect" the children. Children should be able to use a challenge-by-choice strategy to own more decision-making and control over how they use their bodies. Having children choose the challenges they are comfortable with provides them multiple opportunities to assess themselves and track their individual progress over time on a schedule that fits their developmental needs. When adults step back, children step up. Putting trust back in the hands of the children is the best way to provide a true play-based learning environment.

### **Appropriate Risk**

- easily identifiable by children
- approached with basic understanding
- within child's control
- growth is an outcome

### **Unsafe Hazard**

- difficult to assess
- lack of awareness
- out of child's control
- harm is caused

### **Conclusion**

Risky play in education is an important element of a successful school experience. Risk inspires self-confidence and resilience. Successfully navigating risky situations is imperative to improving skills that are crucial to academic development, including problem-solving and executive functioning.

Want schools to improve? Take a risk. Play.

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## How the Environment Impacts Play

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### Introduction

Despite rich evidentiary research data demonstrating play's critical role in young children's lives by supporting healthy development and learning, play is often saddled with the erroneous characterization of being *frivolous*. The National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) position statement on developmentally appropriate practice recognizes and describes the importance of play and uses the term *self-directed play* to refer to play that is initiated and directed by children. A young child's environment is essential in supporting play and should be intended and designed to foster and encourage a variety of play experiences—both indoors and outdoors.

### Problem

The recent historical and global shift away from atmospheres that promote play has brought about scenarios replete with exceedingly anxious parents, teachers, and society participants who have been conditioned to believe children's learning and development can and ought to be hastened by filling their days with structured activities and academic tasks. The result is a significant decrease in playtime and dedicated spaces for play. Child development experts and educators understand that didactic approaches to teaching and learning fly in the face of and erode sound, play-based learning pedagogy.

Settings created specifically for young children have seen a drastic minimization of play. This reality is due to a multitude of factors, including a stronger focus on “academic achievement” in the younger years; a concerted societal effort at removing play from educational settings, instead focusing on early mathematics and literacy; an

increase in academic testing for young children, as programs respond to calls for accountability; state legislatures prescribing early childhood curricula; introducing skills once considered developmentally and cognitively appropriate for older children into the earlier years; compelling preschool teachers to prepare children “academically” (e.g., school readiness); and drilling and practicing basic skills with young children at the expense of opportunities for exploration and discovery.

Essentially, the attack on playful early childhood environments has been attributed to societal anxiety and a misdirected focus on gratuitous academic milestones at the expense of holistic child development. Such an approach is akin to building a house without a foundation: The facade may temporarily appear impressive, but the structure is unlikely to stand the test of time.

## **Background**

Research has revealed that play in early childhood is not just about having fun; rather, it's a critical part of a child's development. Play has been shown to support brain structure and functioning by facilitating synapse connections and improving brain plasticity. Environments that impact and promote play are the brain's version of a gym, helping it to grow stronger and more flexible. Early brain development expert and pediatrician Andrew Garner has explained how the early environment literally becomes embedded within the brain and changes its architecture.

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004), housed at the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, has counseled that early childhood environments must strive to involve young children in reciprocal learning interactions with adults and peers rather than focusing on isolated “pre-academic” work. Moreover, the Council warns that children’s natural interests and intrinsic drives to learn must be capitalized upon rather than following an adult-determined agenda. Simply stated, young children shine and develop ideally in playful, interactive environments rather

than through educational settings that focus on rote instruction.

Research related to learning processes suggests playful environments can shift antiquated approaches to early childhood education (teacher-led instruction, lectures, worksheets) towards more active, child-centered environments that foster opportunities rich in exploration (Fisher et al., 2013; Weisberg et al., 2013; Zosh et al., 2018). Sylva and colleagues (2006) noted that early environments were significant predictors of children's development at school entry, and environmental ratings were strongly related to children's social behaviors in preschool.

The quality of the environment and the experiences offered therein can significantly influence the benefits a child gathers through play. Therefore, it is important to ensure that early childhood environments are rich in opportunities supportive of a child's play experiences.

## **Strategies**

Creating a playful learning environment for young children is essential to nurturing their curiosity, creativity, and love for learning. Achieving such environments can range from using colors and décor (paint, furniture) to setting environments that balance comfort and play. Settings that incorporate sensory experiences into the play environment (e.g., water play, sensory tables filled with materials like rice or beans, and nature exploration activities) stimulate the senses and support cognitive development.

Additionally, hands-on play activities encourage exploration, experimentation, and discovery. Including building blocks, puzzles, sensory bins, playdough, and manipulatives provides optimal opportunities for child-centered play. Also, incorporating music and movement (e.g., songs, rhymes, musical instruments) can foster play and teach concepts related to socialization and cognition.

Outdoor play environments are as essential as indoor settings. The play they promote allows children to engage in physical activity, explore nature, and develop gross motor skills. The outdoors can also encourage imaginative play by prompting children to engage in creativity to role-play and create their narratives.

Perhaps one of the most critical elements of an effective, play-based environment is the presence of child-led activities. Allowing children to take the lead in their learning and play by following their interests and curiosities provides opportunities for asking questions, exploring topics of interest, and engaging in projects and activities about which they are passionate.

## **Conclusion**

Maria Montessori cautioned that a child has a different relation to his environment from ours: The child absorbs it. The things a child sees are not just remembered; they form part of his soul (Montessori, 1961). The environment, therefore, is crucial in shaping the way children play. Creating environments that are safe, stimulating, and supportive of exploration and social interaction enhances children's play and promotes holistic development.

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## Play Across The Lifespan

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## From Kindergarten to College: Embracing Playful Learning in Higher Education

Andrea Sanchez

### Introduction

Six years ago, I allowed play to help revitalize and reconceptualize my role as a public kindergarten teacher. During that time, I participated in a cohort of teachers in our county working to re-incorporate play into the early childhood classroom. That we even had to have a cohort to do this is a story for another time. I was at a point in my career where I needed to feel the delight in learning and teaching again, and this was my chance. I embraced this work, completely overhauling what I had done in the past and finding great joy in doing so. My role was to bring this work back to my school and support my colleagues while they worked to re-incorporate play into their classrooms. What I encountered, however, was great reluctance.

My colleagues were understandably apprehensive about incorporating play. It was not that they did not *believe* in the power of play. Instead, they were uncertain about creating a playful environment that met the state standards required by the administration. Throughout their training and careers, they had never been exposed to coursework or professional development emphasizing play's importance for young children.

Fast-forward to last year. I took on a new role as an instructor in a teacher training program at one of my local universities. The course I was assigned was very content-heavy, focusing on foundational reading skills in K-2. It also consisted of an almost three-hour time slot. My students often seemed tired and disengaged.

In this course, I often ask my students to share their reflections from their field experiences. From these discussions, I discovered that most students were part of very structured programs, where they observed and participated in applying predominantly scripted or online curricula. I pondered how I could demonstrate to my students the power of playful learning in early childhood. Could I show them that playful learning can and should still be a part of the process, even when you have significant and rigorous content to teach? That play can infuse joy into learning, making it more effective and enjoyable.

## Background

I was aware of the limitations of professional preparation related to play for early childhood teachers. I also knew the program requirements for the early childhood teacher training program where I worked. Bautista et al. (2019) explain that for teachers to understand and implement purposeful play in the classroom successfully, it necessitates a high level of curricular and pedagogical understanding. Bautista et al. (2019) also found that courses around play should include designing active play experiences, supporting children's behavior during play, and the role of the teacher during these experiences. Additional research (Sisson & Kroeger, 2017) has found that it is vital to a child's play that the teacher has a history that includes engagement with and in play pedagogies. As these students become teachers, they will, in turn, add to the discussion regarding the role of play in education. It saddens me to acknowledge that students in my college have one class on play during their five semesters in the teacher training program.

While early educators and child advocates may be aware of the benefits of play, it is often difficult to apply what they know about play in the classroom. Play provides more than just cognitive development. For adults and children, it is an opportunity to build relationships with peers, self-development, and social interaction (Beloglovsky, 2023). Beloglovsky (2023) makes the distinction between *play* and *playfulness*: "Play is action... Playfulness is a state of mind that leads to wonder, discovery, flexible thinking, and risk-taking" (p. 20). She explains that play is not only "central to building community" (p. 27) but also leads to the use of equitable practices. "When adults play together, they are part of equity-centered ecosystems" (p. 27). Playfulness helps adults to develop and sustain flexible thinking and build relationships with one another. Additionally, play creates "an alert, active, but relatively non-stressed frame of mind" (Gray, 2017, p. 126), all factors we hope exist in higher education classrooms.

Play is also a form of activism. Children can engage in hierarchical structures in playful spaces and challenge biases and cultural norms (Rosen 2017). This is not limited to the early childhood classroom. Suppose soon-to-be practitioners or pre-service teachers have opportunities in the college classroom to engage in playful

spaces and playful practices. In that case, this helps them recognize the benefits of creating an equity-centered environment. They learn to recognize the benefits of play and will be more capable of advocating for their young students' rights to play and playful spaces (Gronlund & Rendon, 2017).

Today, play for young children looks quite different than that of even my millennial generation. Increased digital use has made technology highly accessible to today's children (Thomas, 2017). This digital awareness uniquely situates Gen Z pre-service teachers. They have had similar childhood experiences and are familiar with the shift from play as interaction with materials to play as a viewing of the materials (Beloglovsky, 2023). Their unique perspective allows them to engage their future students in new ways, but understanding the importance of play must still come first.

## **Strategies**

There are four main strategies I employed in my college classroom. These included the consistent use of manipulatives, regular cooperative learning experiences, movement, and varied methods for students to demonstrate their learning. I particularly wanted to incorporate solitary play and social play into my college classroom (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Solitary play includes tasks generally seen as hobbies (knitting, woodworking, drawing, etc.). Social play includes (but is not limited to) engaging in riddles, stories, and jokes (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Many of my students had shared that they no longer engaged in hobbies. Re-incorporating solitary play into our classroom could begin to develop an environment of playfulness. At the same time, opportunities for social interaction in class could help build a sense of community and connection to one another. If I could show my students the value of play, they would also learn to value it in their future practice (Beloglovsky, 2023).

## **Manipulatives and Art Materials**

My first, and possibly the easiest strategy to employ, was the consistent use of manipulatives. When my students became tired during class and disengaged from the content, they immediately turned to their devices to meet their need for stimulation. I started by simply placing trays with play dough canisters for each group of students. I

was nervous about how the students would react to this. Still, when they arrived, they immediately chose colors and opened the canisters before I had even introduced the materials!

Next, I included mini-Pop It toys in the trays and hashtag blocks the following week. My students entered the class and immediately set up their workspace by selecting which manipulative toys they would use that day. Students would chat about the color of the play dough and the shape of the Pop-It toys they chose. Materials like coloring sheets with drawing materials, water painting, and wax sticks have also entered our rotation. Now, instead of noticing a marked level of fatigue during class, I see a consistent use of the manipulatives and art materials provided throughout the session.

## **Movement**

One day, about halfway through our class session, a student returned from break and asked, "Do you think we could just do class outside? I walked around the building, and it is beautiful outside." I paused and, for a split second, considered how I would respond to this request by one of my kindergarten students. I would consider their interests as they emerged and take any opportunity that arose. How was this any different? We packed our bags and materials and headed out. This was slow pedagogy in action. Nothing in my teaching could be transferred to an outdoor learning space. Students were still able to engage in group discussions, and we were able to review an upcoming assignment together.

The impromptu move of our class meeting only happens occasionally. What *does* happen is what I call Walk and Talks. I provide my students with group discussion prompts over their readings or the content, and then we all head out in our little packs to discuss the question. After about ten or fifteen minutes, students return ready to share their ideas and discussion with the rest of the class. I do not do this *in replacement of* a regular class break. I see our breaks much like I did recess in kindergarten: a time belonging solely to students, not contingent on their behavior or how much academic work they have accomplished that day. Walk and Talks as a teaching strategy allows students to discuss content and develop ideas while engaging in physical movement.

## **Cooperative Learning**

During my first week of college teaching, I shared uncertainty about what to do on the first day with a colleague. In kindergarten, I always brought out low-stakes kinds of toys like drawing materials, blocks, and puzzles. She told me, "Markers and chart paper are the college equivalent of Lincoln Logs. " I am not sure about those being the *exact* equivalent, but I have found a lot of value in allowing students to work together in a low-stakes setting. Rather than group work outside of class time, which tends always to have one student not participating for whatever reason, our class has transitioned to weekly group work sessions. In these mini sessions, generally, about a half-hour long, students share what they read or experience, make connections to others, and develop concept maps and other graphic organizers to demonstrate their understanding. It provides an opportunity for movement (I consistently make them switch groups and move around for this) and offers perspectives from students they would not otherwise interact with. This exemplifies building our equitable learning community (Beloglovsky, 2023). Students practice active and respectful listening and discuss each other's various points of view.

## **Multiple Methods for Demonstrating Learning**

One of the first things I changed in my kindergarten teaching practices was to approach the evaluation of students as one would within the Reggio Emilia approach. I wanted my kindergarteners to document their learning using multiple materials and methods. I also like this for my college students. I want them to recognize the value of allowing learning to be reflected in various ways. Our final project in the class is the students' reflections on what they have learned and how they find it applicable to their future practice. In some ways, this is a struggle for students. No one loves a rubric more than future teachers. While a rubric is still provided, the specifications for what this project should look like are not provided. I want them to employ their creativity and imagine what they could create rather than what I want of them. I have still received written papers, but I have also received slideshows, posters, and videos.

## Implications and Conclusion

On the first day of class and at many points throughout the school year, I express to my students my desire to treat them with courtesy and respect. I often reflect on how early educators discuss the importance of recognizing the needs young children bring to their classrooms. We work diligently to be responsive to these, building relationships and striving for connection with our students. We recognize the power that comes with play and joyful learning in the early years. However, such a drastic change in classroom conditions allowed me to open my eyes to some students' incredible disconnect in the higher education learning environment.

The changes I made to the classroom and my instruction had big and small implications. Opportunities for movement have increased discussion and participation. It has helped to shorten my lecture points while keeping students on task in a way that recognizes our body's need to move. Students were also immediately interested in the manipulatives. They were excited to discuss the materials and choose what to use. At no point did they seem hesitant to engage. I have also observed a decrease in their reliance on cell phones during class time. Unlike kindergarteners, some students choose just to mash and stretch their playdough, while some create elaborate sculptures (to the point where I considered adding playdough tools). Students have also been eager to display their creativity with various assignments when given the opportunity. There was some hesitance initially, with students expressing their need for me to "just tell them what I preferred." Once we got past the fact, I wanted them to discuss the pertinent information as outlined in the rubric; there were no other limitations.

Similarly to working in kindergarten, this practice has required some additional planning. It has required me to rethink very explicitly what my goals are for student learning and to reimagine ways they might demonstrate this. Similarly to my work in kindergarten, the university still holds me to certain curriculum standards. Still, play can and *should* support the curriculum, not vice versa. While the first semester required a bit more work and planning on my part, it has (and I anticipate it continuing to) become more manageable as I go.

As I work to prepare pre-service teachers to apply play in their future classrooms, I am not willing to accept the disconnect of typical higher education classrooms, *especially* for those entering their work with young children. Implementing playful techniques allows educators to bridge this gap and model, creating a more engaging, student-centered learning environment. Playful learning strategies can positively impact student engagement and participation. While it does take more planning in the early stages, it is still possible to meet standards and, even more so, allow students to feel confident in demonstrating their understanding of the content.

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## Playing with the Big Kids: Nurturing Connection and Creativity Among College Students

Tabitha Dell'Angelo

### Introduction

When I first became a college professor, I prided myself on bringing playfulness into my teaching. In my courses, we created and played games to help with content learning. We did improv games to elaborate on concepts and take the role of theorists, acted out timelines, did crossword puzzles, and laughed and learned. Many students told me how they found material easier to remember, discuss, and apply because of this approach to learning. I even had a few students graduate and become teachers and then reach out to tell me they also implemented playful methods into their classes. Then, one semester, when I asked for informal feedback about the class, a student said, "We need more power points." I was crushed.

I should have heard that through the lens of universal design for learning and acknowledged that different students need different things. Perhaps I should have incorporated different, more traditional notes for students who found them helpful. Instead, I let my imposter syndrome take full control, feared for my untenured self that I would not be seen as a person who instilled rigor in their coursework, and swung very far in the traditional side of instruction. I put my games away, stopped doing improv and role plays, and instead worked on slide decks and discussion formats.

My "new" approach consisted of plain old lectures, PowerPoint presentations, and discussions. Of course, I tried various discussion formats, and my natural inclination is to incorporate humor and stories in my teaching. However, the style of teaching could not be described as transformational. And no one complained. My teaching evaluations were great, and my relationships with students were still good.

The part that made me most heartsick was the fact that students expected that kind of instruction and perceived it to be the way teaching and learning should work. The style of lecture/discussion was comfortable, expected, and fit the schema for what a classroom should look like. And that was exactly what bothered me. Not only did I

believe that a different approach to teaching would benefit them, but I was also teaching people how to become teachers! I was reinforcing an idea that I did not want them to replicate when they became teachers. At the same time, I am a human being who wants to be liked, and coloring outside the lines meant that I would have to meet and deal with resistance – like my student who said we needed "more power points." Ultimately, I decided to bring play back.

The decision to bring play back into the work of college was based on the knowledge of the immense benefits of play. These include the cognitive benefits that come with stress reduction, the potential for building supportive connections, and my belief in a sentiment shared by Stuart Brown (2009) that "When we play, we are engaged in the purest expression of our humanity, the truest expression of our individuality."

### **Approaches/Strategies**

College students are in this wonderful liminal space between childhood and adulthood. The entire backbone of college is about being on the threshold of the next stage of your life. From a sociological perspective, college might be considered a developmental third space. Strictly speaking, Third Space considers how a person might move between home, school, community, and other settings. And how the discourse in each setting may be very different. Third space is the *in-between space* (Bhabha, 1994), where "cultural boundaries meet and blur" (Smith, 2008). Some scholars might argue that to appropriately apply the Third Space, you must be able to return to the first and second spaces and take with you the new understandings that were gained in the reflective *third space* (Flessner, 2011). Another way to consider how the *third space* can be applied would be to imagine the reflective *third space* in terms of navigating the binary of work and play. Unfortunately, the common discourse in many cultures is that work and play are opposites. Peter Gray (2013) writes about work as something one must do and play as what one wants to do. He writes,

*"One of the first and most often reinforced lessons children learn in school is*

*that work and play are opposites. Work is what one must do; play is what one wants to do. Work is burdensome; play is fun. Work is essential; play is trivial.*

*But when we leave school and go on to the "real world," at least some of us, the lucky ones, discover that work is not the opposite of play. In fact, work can be play, or at least it can be imbued with a high degree of playfulness." (Gray, 2023).*

Utilizing third space theory as a way to reconsider work and play and reimagine a space where our understanding of each creates something completely different and beneficial to how we see and interact with the world – perhaps something much closer to the "lucky ones" to which Gray refers.

Both work and play can be considered behaviors and mindsets. What are we doing that we consider to be either work or play? Where do they intersect? How is our thinking reflective of either an orientation toward play or work? Where do these mindsets intersect? The *third space* is the reflective space, where we might consider bringing a playful sensibility into our work and perhaps some intentionality into our play.

In the next section, I will offer ways to approach play with college students. I am sure many readers have other ideas, and I hope you will also share them.

### **Building a Culture of Play**

Play scholars (Brown & Vaughn, 2009) might frame play as an activity that is fun and pleasurable but "purposeless." Purposelessness, in this instance, should not be confused with uselessness. To be sure, play scholars and educators have long recognized that play is very useful in enhancing cognition, social interaction, and learning. In approaching play with college students, strictly "purposeless" play is a hard sell. However, it is in creating spaces to play just for the sake of play that we can begin to change the culture as it relates to play.

Developing a continuum of approaches to play is a great place to start. The first two, puzzle tables and typewriters, are opportunities for purposeless play. Whoever

comes across these opportunities may engage with them, but they may engage for different reasons and experience different benefits from that interaction. The following two examples are community events. Community events are organized to create an opportunity for play and for being playful that is more intentional. However, recognizing that college students may feel apprehensive about engaging in play, these events give a clear reason (permission) for participation. The final example is classroom-based play, which is used to aid in instruction. This is the furthest from the pure definition of play as "purposeless." In fact, it is quite purposeful. As an instructor, specific choices about playful objects and activities are brought into the space.

***Puzzle tables and Typewriters.*** A few years ago, I wondered what would happen if I had just put a puzzle out in the middle of the lobby of our building (Figure 1). It took less than a day to find out. At any given time throughout the day, students sat around the puzzle and worked on it. Completing each puzzle is a collaborative effort between students – some of whom do not know each other and might never know that they each worked on the puzzle. Since the first puzzle I put out almost two years ago, the students have collectively completed dozens of puzzles. Within a month, it was clear that the puzzle would be popular, so we purchased an upgraded puzzle table with more space and a felt surface (Figure 2). In Spring 2023, the school magazine mentioned the puzzle table as one of the "10 Things that make us happy" (Figure 3).

Similarly, a few times each semester, I put out three typewriters. I just put one out the first time and added a sign indicating it was a "play break. (Figure 4). But since then, I just put a few out with no explanation. Students type on them all day long. They gather around, trying to figure it out. Some students play with the hammers and the keys, examining how it works. Others will sit and type for a long time. They take photos of each other typing, they write poems, and they are having fun.

Figure 1: The first puzzle that went out into the lobby



Figure 2: The upgraded puzzle table



Figure 3: 10 Things that Make Us Happy

**PRAIRIE**  
2024-2025

# 10 things THAT MAKE US 😊

- 1. "We opened doors to literacy."**  
For Argonne '24 and David Roberts '23 established an 800+ free libraries on campus. More than 200 books have cycled through the Interim March, and several commenters share that about 50 people pick books three each day.
- 2. There's always a catch**  
Miss Lupton '23 snagged the 2022 Division III Softball award becoming only the fourth TCU softball player in history to win.
- 3. Live from Lincoln Center**  
TCU's Chorus performed at NYSCA's Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center in March as part of the 20th NYC National Choral Festival for LGBTQIA+ youth. Director Goodson from the cast of Hamilton joined the students.
- 4. A first for firsts**  
The college celebration became a day of Alpha Kappa Alpha, an honor society for first generation college students. "This is a big step in recognizing the needs of our community," says Sofia Martinez '25, one of the 10 student inductees.
- 5. It IS a meteorite**  
When a rock-like object crashed through the roof of a home in Tiberville, New Jersey in May, TCU physics professors were called on to confirm what the object was. The result: a meteorite that is more than a billion years old. See the details here: [tcu.edu/meteorite](#).
- 6. A couple of Washington bigwigs**  
International studies student Henry Suarez '23 and his professor Cassius Thornton both took trips to the White House this year. Suarez, who studied as part of the US College Study Program with Vice President Kamala Harris and congressional chief of staff and POTUS policy adviser Thornton was an "ESQ Graduate" health abuse plans aspect of the annual White House East or Fall Ball activities.
- 7. Puzzle peace**  
School of Education Dean Tabitha Bell '84 plays a variety of puzzles on a table outside of her office this year. "I'm a big advocate for play on a regular basis," she says. "Not enough students and staff worked on them. It became this fun, collaborative project."
- 8. A \$30,000 idea**  
Molly O'Brien '23 and Emma Olson '23 won the 2023 Mayo Business Plan Competition and the \$30K that comes with first place for their plan to create a subscription-based wellness app for young women with chronic health conditions. The app will use artificial intelligence to provide women with individualized health resources.
- 9. Battle of the broadcasts**  
The McCortley family has a major league dilemma when it comes to the Broadway vs. Great Street baseball rivalry. This season, Pat McCortley '17 hosts the TCU radio pre- and postgame shows for the New York Mets, while his dad, Tom McCortley '88, continues his duties as television color for the Philadelphia Phillies.
- 10. Remembering her roots**  
Tulane University grad Blinley Wang '17 was an assistant professor of psychology. In an unexpected position, Wang treated her thanks to TCU grads John Bunker, Abbey Burdick, and James Eberhart. Thank you for believing in me from the earliest stages! I am endlessly grateful for the support I received (and still do I post!) @TCU21

**Notable**

**\$546,487**  
Eight earned Top of Writing field, Thanks, Love, You for the event again.

**Top 100**  
TCU's ranking in the Periodicals Best Independent Business School Rating.

**70,999**  
# of OVER-50s on Egle Field '24 and his team from Eugene New Dodge administration on campus.

**700**  
career wins  
Coach Nelly Miller  
all-time

**350**  
career wins  
Coach Steve Olson  
all-time

PHOTOS: JACQUELYNNE HARRIS, TONY HANE, ANDREW GUNTER

Figure 4: Typewriter Play Break



**Community Events.** Sometimes, college students need a bit of motivation – even permission – to play. One way to create a situation that encourages play is to bring younger children to campus. At least once each year, we invite schoolchildren to campus. We typically get a full grade from one school. A typical year might have 75-80 second graders. Leading up to the visit, the college students revisit their likes and dislikes from that age. They work together to plan a day of play. During our most recent visit, there was an outdoor setup that included many choices, such as cornhole, jump ropes, sidewalk chalk, big Jenga, bean bags, hula hoops, and other objects. Outside, we also brought in a children's musician who sang songs – so there was a de facto dance floor. Inside, we dedicated a classroom space to quiet play, painting, crafts, reading, listening to soft music, etc. This was a sensory-safe space. Children could make whatever choices they wanted, and the college students were asked to follow the lead of the children and play with them.

Figure 5: Community Play Day



Figure 6: Community play day



Figure 7: Community play day: Indoor sensory space



***Play in the College Classroom.*** In 2022, Lisa Forbes and David Thomas published the *Professors at Play Playbook*. In the book, they bring together ideas from professors across the country and share them for free. Seriously, you can buy the book, but it is also available for free download. Each idea includes specific instructions about



how to implement the play experience as well as some discussion of the benefits of the approach. Here is my honest confession: I downloaded it and never read it until recently. But that is only because incorporating play was always part of my practice, and I had my own long list of ideas that I would utilize. That said, now that I have flipped through, tabbed, and annotated the book's contents. I am looking forward to trying some of these ideas out and modifying some of my own based on ideas from the text. Other texts that have inspired activities for the college classroom are [How to Teach Nature Journaling](#) (also a free download) and the book *You Are an Artist*, which has a content-related website. Additionally, I have long been inspired by improvisation and methods from *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1977). Using the framework from *Professors at Play*, I will describe just one (it was seriously difficult to choose one) of my favorite approaches here.

### **Examining Current Events: Technique Summary Description**

We get information about the world from myriad sources. Newspaper articles, magazines, social media, blogs, television, and other sources of information can sometimes be extremely helpful and sometimes just as misleading. We also know there is a very real vulnerability with respect to confirmation bias that must be considered. This activity was created as a way to help students explore current events from multiple perspectives and consider how the way we interact with media might influence our understanding of the world. In this particular course, we were preparing to read a play called *Crocodile Seeking Refuge* (Linden, 2005). This play was inspired by the playwright's time as a writer in residence at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture. The play follows five asylum seekers as well as their attorney and others impacted by their situations. Before we read the play, I wanted to be sure the students understood what it meant to be a refugee.

### **Technique Detailed Instructions**

To prepare for the lesson, the instructor asked each student to search for the word "refugee" and find one article from any source. They were to print out the

full article and write the full headline on a separate sheet of paper. On the day of the activity, each student brought in the full article and the paper with just the headline.

### **Steps**

1. Post just the titles all around the perimeter of the classroom.
2. Students circulate the room and read each headline.
3. After a few minutes, the instructor asks the students to stand by the headline that interests them the most. The instructor is looking for groups of 4-5 students, so some shuffling may be necessary to finalize groups.
4. All unused headlines are removed.
5. Students work together, read the headline, and create a tableau that tells the headline's story. They are instructed not to interpret the headline based on prior knowledge but to try to communicate exactly what the headline is trying to convey.
6. Each group reads their headline aloud and shares their tableau.
7. Groups reconvene and create a new tableau that conveys the perspective of someone who disagrees with the headline.
8. Each group reads their headline and shares their tableau.
9. Each group reconvenes and is given the article corresponding to their headline. They read it together and discuss their initial interpretations based on the headline and their new understanding based on the full article.
10. Each group shares their reflections.
11. Large group discussion about interpreting current events, media literacy, and strategies for engaging with and learning about current events.

### **Results, Impact, and Outcomes**

This class activity aims to create a space where students can make discoveries on their own about how the media may influence them. Although this example is a serious topic, students are put in a position where they can be playful, embody an idea without words, work collaboratively, and come to realizations about complex ideas without a lecture. In this activity, students were able to learn about what it means to be a refugee from multiple perspectives and explore the ways in which refugee status is portrayed in the media before they read a play where that concept was particularly salient.

## **Conclusion**

College is a unique time in a person's life. College students are at once children and adults. They may be working very diligently on a paper or in a lab and then leaving to throw a frisbee around, participate in intramural sports, or just be silly together. It is a liminal space between where there is real value in being at once childlike and adultlike. Those of us who work with college students have the unique opportunity to encourage playfulness and demonstrate that there is a place for an incredible value to creativity and play across the lifespan.

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## Playful Service Learning: Making University Courses More Engaging

Joyce Hemphill, Laura Scheinholz, & Heather Von Bank

### Introduction

*At the monthly writer's group, Dalila, a long-time child developmentalist and play advocate, shares her work by asking her colleagues if they think what they do in the group is an example of playful learning. To Dalila, it's a simple question, one that follows her day-in and day-out, permeating every facet of life. To the group, it's clearly a new idea. As thoughtful mutterings begin, Tomas takes the lead, loudly proclaiming that the writer's group has nothing to do with play and recreation. Perplexed at the totality of the word "nothing," Dalila asks Tomas his thoughts on what recreation is, but this is met only with the promise of a thought-out answer later, an answer that never comes. What happened, Dalila wonders, in the span of this individual's life, who undoubtedly played as a child, to create such a divide between play and not play, between childhood and adulthood? How did we become so certain as a society that playfulness belongs to youth, and even then, only in non-academic settings?*

Where does the divide that Dalila exposed begin? When did play become a "four-letter word" dismissed by adults? The field of educational research readily provides examples of the importance of play in preschools (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009), elementary schools (Mardel et al., 2023; Parker & Thomsen, 2019), and high schools (Leon et al., 2022). By the time students reach post-secondary education, play-based or playful learning has been mostly eliminated from course curricula. Perhaps college is seen as a more serious time, a do-or-die for one's future career. It is equally possible that the large class sizes and lecture styles of collegiate classroom environments make it more difficult to design and execute playful activities and assessments of learning outcomes.

Challenging, yes, but not insurmountable when we consider the multitude of teaching and evaluation options available. One method for incorporating play and playful philosophies into college learning, mutually beneficial to students and the surrounding population, is working with community stakeholders to develop hands-on projects via service learning. With this approach, students aren't just learning playfully; they are

equipped to bring a play-based attitude to the public and model playful behavior for a larger audience.

## **Background**

**Play.** It is easy to reminisce about how children play during their school day. Whether they are experimenting with paints and crayons during arts and crafts projects, playing "teacher" while reading to their stuffed animals, or engaging in games of tag at recess, it is more challenging to think about college-aged individuals still needing and benefiting from playful learning. We minimize individuals' need for play as they age and even downgrade the importance of playful inquiry through imagination and creativity in college classes. Further, we know the traditional college classroom where professors "stand and deliver" no longer serves today's students' needs (Freeman et al., 2014).

Over the last 15 years, the authors have interacted with their undergraduate students using a variety of playful activities, assessments, and service learning projects; for example, we have used guided play to explain theoretical concepts, cross-cultural games, and playful instruction (Zosh et al., 2018). We played word games and asked 150 students in education classrooms to recite phrases aloud until the resulting sounds were muffled into a whole new phrase. In small groups, we gave students a variety of air and water-based manipulatives with which to play to create a description of what it means 'to float.' Education majors were assigned the task of creating the perfect syllabus with respect to attendance rules and a grading scale. Theories were critiqued and analyzed based on the theorists' Zodiac sign. We invited students to write and perform songs to help them remember class material. We have revised our course grading rubric into a mastery-based learning assessment called badging, like the Boys/Girls Scout model of achieving badges. Doing this puts the onus of learning on the students, so they decide how many badges they want to earn, which determines their grade. Sometimes, however, play begins simply as the teacher's attitude to a class; playful activity and mindsets ensue.

There are challenges to instituting this type of playful curriculum, but they can be met with advanced planning. Different types of play are more or less feasible in different kinds of classrooms. The number of students, course material, required assessments, and classroom layout determine what type of play will work. Communication with departments or schools is essential as using playful activities at this level can be a significant change from past curricula. It is important to be prepared to show not only how play will positively affect learning outcomes but also how it will *not* negatively affect them. Perhaps most important, though, is the attitude of the teacher instituting play. Be mindful that play is not just a break from learning. Instead, it is a different form of instruction where the learner is actively engaged rather than passively receiving information from educator to student, expert to novice. In playful environments, teachers are more facilitators than instructors. If something isn't working, be flexible. Come to the situation with an open, malleable mind *for* the students. If this sounds like a significant amount of work, that is because it is and may be part of why play has remained elusive in the later years of education.

The payoff, though? Worth it. What we have seen in our classrooms has been mirrored by researchers looking specifically at play in post-secondary educational settings. Students approach class with joy and pleasure and are more prone to those wonderful 'a-ha moments' we all cherish. We have seen students engage at a greater level in large classroom settings where waning attention runs rampant (Forbes, 2021). We have had students take on tasks they found difficult because our approach is different (Key Practices for Playful Learning, 2020), and we have had several former students of our play classes tell us how much they use our style or lessons in their careers later in life (Heljakka, 2023). Through a play-based approach, they are learning how to tackle future challenges, including those where they might be the teacher, manager, parent, etc. In this way, play in higher education classrooms is a pay-it-forward situation.

**Service Learning.** Service learning is a method of teaching that involves connecting what a student is learning with how they can apply that knowledge to the greater community. The University of Wisconsin-Madison, where our play roots are embedded,

describes it further as an approach that imbues a "...sense of civic responsibility while strengthening communities." (Morgridge Center for Public Policy, 2011). Importantly, this type of learning must be active. Service learning is not a professor standing in front of a group of students, telling them how the knowledge they gain today *could* help in the future. It is not simply providing a litany of reasons *for* civic involvement. Nor is it volunteering. While volunteerism and community service are laudable learning approaches, they differ from service learning. Service learning is the collaboration of the agency, the student, and the instructor (Furco & Billig, 2002). It is tied to academic goals and learning outcomes because it requires students to reflect on their experiences (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Wulsin, 2008). This approach requires being purposefully involved while learning, taking expertise out into the world, and climbing down from ivory towers.

In college settings, service learning projects can take several different forms. A college professor teaching a research methods class may require students to conduct action-based research with non-profit organizations in their community. The students would interview the employees at those organizations about a specific topic, like the organization's structure or the efficacy of an outreach program. As part of the course, the students would analyze the results and present their findings to their professor and the non-profit organization's employees. Or, a plant biology student might take an internship to learn more about native and invasive foliage at a local forest preserve, grow more passionate about that organization's mission, and begin to educate the public.

While service learning is a great way to connect schools and the community, there are also several specific advantages for students. Individuals who engage in service learning benefit through higher academic achievement and increased scores on standardized testing (Meuers, 2023). The engagement that service learning provides improves social skills and psychological well-being and decreases delinquency. Students who participate in service learning can develop a better sense of responsibility, respect for their surroundings, and respect for people from all walks of life (National



Youth Leadership Council, 2023). They are also more likely to engage extensively in their community, standing up for the rights of people around them and feeling valued by those individuals. A recent study found that "over 91% of Community-based Learning students got more out of their course than a traditional course, and 100 percent of past course participants had a positive experience" (Lewandowski, 2018).

### **Our Strategy - Play Class and PlayDay**

In 2005, we created and ran our first PlayDay at the Dane County Fair in Madison, Wisconsin. At the time, relying on student (high school and college) volunteers, we filled a 30,000 sq. ft. space with activities designed for families to create and play together. Not only were these reproducible games made from safe, reusable materials easily found around the home, but they also targeted and advertised specific developmental benefits. In 2006, we obtained a grant to design a Play and Child Development summer course that would coincide with the Fair and our PlayDay. Students from a breadth of majors at Madison, education, counseling, pharmacy, library sciences, economics, dentistry, management, and even future NFL players, learned about the lifelong benefits of play for child development. They not only learned how to apply play to their own careers but also discovered how to bring that knowledge to the community.

Over the course of four weeks, we gathered students at indoor and outdoor spaces to discuss and experience the power that play holds in an individual's journey to knowledge. Each course started with a rousing session of Junkyard Sports (DeKoven, 2004). Subsequent classes involved constructing and playing games like achi, mancala, ulu maika, and jianzi (Hemphill et al., 2014); guest speakers who incorporated their own playful activities, like a music educator who engaged students in the art of graphic notation (Stamp, 2013) or a biologist who taught students how to make their own biome out of a used, clean plastic drink bottle ([www.bottlebiology.org](http://www.bottlebiology.org)); and make and take activities like playdough, slime, and sidewalk chalk. Through these hands-on, daily and weekly activities, students were encouraged to focus on how play might be applied in their fields of study and go forth and try it out.

With a newly established background in the power of play, it was time to start thinking about how to bring that knowledge to the greater community. PlayDay, which took place in the third week of the month-long course, was fast approaching. Each student would come up with an activity to engage the community in play. This activity had to involve active participation, be fun and engaging for families, and use easily accessible repurposable materials. Each student's station included a poster explaining the activity, its history and cultural relevance, how the *making and playing* benefited participants with respect to cognitive, physical, and social development, its connection to STEAM, and suggestions for how to play. Ideally, families would play with their created game or activity in ways they saw fit, but students were available to offer tips.

Many students created activities related to their field of interest. For example, a UW hockey player created hockey sticks from paper tubes and tape-ball pucks. Some students created messy nature-based activities, including little more than a children's pool filled with water, potting soil, and discarded plastic tubs and tubes. In addition to the students' make-n-play activities, 300 cardboard boxes were available to stack, build, and tumble. After PlayDay, students wrote papers and gave presentations on their experience and how it would shape their use of play in their future careers.

The community came to expect PlayDays each year. Repeat parent customers reported that their kids asked to return when the fair came around again. One former student returned each summer with the kids she nannied. Summer childcare centers began to visit, as well. The use of repurposed materials common to most households was especially beneficial for centers that served children of all backgrounds and abilities. Kids often went home to reproduce the games and activities they experienced at the fair. Increasing parent requests for a pamphlet or book of PlayDay activities led to the publication of *The Power of Playful Learning: The Green Edition* in 2014, which brought playful, educational approaches to an even broader audience.

Though this particular class was itself about play, we see the application of the ideas within reaching a broader audience. The principles involved in playfully reaching out to

the greater community could easily be involved in other disciplines, such as school counseling, social work, sports medicine, science, business and human resources, and many others. What's more, the students who took this course are now out in the workforce, acting as mentors to colleagues. They have become play ambassadors to the world.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

While we often think of large lecture halls and hours of listening to professors drone on in college classes, there is no reason those same environments can't be made playful. One particularly rich method for doing this is through service learning. We have provided an example of this application in our play class and PlayDays at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a process later repeated at Minnesota State University-Mankato. Students learned material in a playful way and then brought their new knowledge to the public via different community events. Students partaking in these classes were able to reflect on their experience and how they could bring a more playful attitude to their fields of study and future careers.

There are challenges to changing the college curriculum to include play or playful learning, including finding supportive department chairs and staff, continuing to meet academic standards, and even space and place issues. However, doing a little extra work upfront will help educators meet these challenges head-on. While our classes dealt with the topic of play, there is no reason the principles and practices we applied could not be generalized to other fields, as some of our former students have shown. Even small changes each semester will allow teachers to make their way toward a more playful tomorrow in post-secondary education.

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## The Transformative Power of Self-Active Play for Adults

Carly Bedard

### Introduction

Six years ago, I was introduced to an experience that profoundly changed my views and outlook on adult and early childhood learning. I was invited to attend a self-active play experience for early childhood coaches based on the self-active play protocols developed by Dr. Walter Drew and Marcia Nell. The self-active play experience included an opportunity to engage in solo, parallel, and cooperative play with open-ended, upcycled materials. After a short introduction by the facilitators, everyone was invited to select a set of materials that were placed in piles on the floor. I was immediately drawn to some sparkling rose gold plastic caps. As I began to play, I appreciated the opportunity to quiet my mind and escape from the laundry list of tasks and concerns present when I entered the room. As I interacted with the shiny caps, I felt free to create, explore, stack, construct, deconstruct, reconstruct, imagine, and PLAY. The ability to enter play without preconceived notions or imposed expectations of the “right” way to engage with the materials was incredibly liberating. Instead of having a prescribed outcome to my play, participants were invited to allow imagination to take over, to tap into their innate sense of creativity, and to engage freely. After about 15 minutes of solo play, participants were invited to pause and journal about the play experience. The time to reflect and consider what thoughts and emotions were present brought a sense of affirmation and attunement and helped to make meaning of the experience. As the play progressed through additional play cycles, including parallel and cooperative play, it was amazing how this play experience created a sense of empathy and understanding of what children should experience as they play—the time to play brought a connection with the inner child and the playful spirit that yearns to create and explore.

The self-active play experience evoked a conviction that children deserve this. We must provide children with experiences that awaken meaningful discovery, insight, creative expression, and joy, so it is imperative that we provide early childhood

professionals with the time and space to experience those dispositions through play themselves.

This paper explores the protocols of self-active play, which entails hands-on play experiences for adults that engage the hands, heart, and mind and remind us of the joy of playing as children. It is intended to help educators, leaders, families, and legislators understand self-active play, the critical need for open-ended self-active play experiences, and how the self-active play experience can be integrated into professional development for early childhood.

### **Problem Statement**

Early childhood educators face a myriad of expectations, regulations, and input regarding the practices they use to support young children's learning and development. The onset of initiatives such as No Child Left Behind (2001) has profoundly impacted the pressure of preparing young children for school, leading to an expansion of academically driven standards-based early childhood programs (Stipek, 2006). Early childhood educators often feel pressure to integrate practices that do not align with developmentally appropriate experiences. "Although most adults agree that children love to play, the same adults deprive children of this opportunity in the name of their higher adult goals. The conflict between play and instruction comes primarily from the belief shared by many of today's adults that school readiness skills need to be taught to children, starting at the earliest age possible, and that these skills need to be taught using the same pedagogy routinely used in first grade and above" (Yudina, 2023, p.284). This tension between honoring children's specific stages of development and ensuring children are ready for kindergarten manifests itself in many ways, including increased challenging behaviors in the classroom, stress and burnout of educators, and teacher-directed classroom practices instead of child-led. Disregarding the biological necessity of child-led play, essential for healthy development, has resulted in a self-perpetuating cycle of increased levels of children experiencing anxiety, feeling overwhelmed, and giving up easily, resulting in frustration and viewing learning as too difficult. Children deprived of rich play experiences show *decreased* empathy and *increased* challenging behaviors (Veiga et al., C, & Rieffe, C., 2016). Teachers are



increasingly likely to report stress and burnout. Stressed teachers are more likely to find children's behaviors challenging and provide less emotional support to the children in their care.

Self-active play provides a powerful antidote to the current pressure to push down academics, which threatens adult and child well-being. At the same time, it offers experiences for both children and adults that support the essential dispositions of learning, resulting in success in school and in society. When educators and leaders experience the power of play through self-active play experiences, they are inspired and motivated to integrate rich, meaningful play experiences with children.

### **Defining Self-Active Play**

For decades, researchers, authors, and advocates have struggled to reach one clear definition of play. In his research, Brian Sutton-Smith identified over 300 definitions of play. Despite the complex nature of play and the difficulty of dispelling a singular definition, many prominent play researchers and authors agree on some common attributes that quantify an activity as playful.

As play researcher Peter Gray shares, "The characteristics of play all have to do with motivation and mental attitude, not with the specific activity" (Gray, 2013, p.139). Gray (2008) defines play as an activity that is self-chosen and self-directed, involving an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind, and an activity in which the means are more valued than ends. He further quantifies play as being an activity that is imaginative, non-literal, and mentally removed in some way from "real" or "serious" life.

In her book *The Original Learning Approach: Weaving Together Playing, Learning, and Teaching in Early Childhood*, Suzanne Axelsson shares, "When it comes to the actual experience of play, I feel that the root of it must be about the balance and connection of freedom, time, joy, imagination, exploration and all of the essential threads, rather than about a single word or idea being elevated or protected in a vacuum to define "this is play" (Axelsson, 2023, p.21). Axelsson offers the Playwork definition as a proposed starting point to understanding play, which entails "a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. Children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play by following their own

instincts, ideas, and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.” (Play Wales 2015). She encourages teachers and leaders to work with families to expand upon that definition and identify additional culturally relevant play definitions. Drawing upon the characteristics of play as being self-motivated, personally directed, and embodying freedom, time, joy, imagination, and exploration, this definition will be used as we delve into the purpose of self-active play experiences.

While there are many beneficial types of play for children and adults, self-active play involves a unique set of protocols and materials, which lends itself to the abovementioned play characteristics. Self-active play is rooted in the constructivist approach to learning, citing inspiration from Friedrich Froebel. Froebel wrote, “Play is the highest phase of child-development of human development at this period for it is self-active representation of the inner from inner necessity and impulse (Froebel, 1887, p. 54).

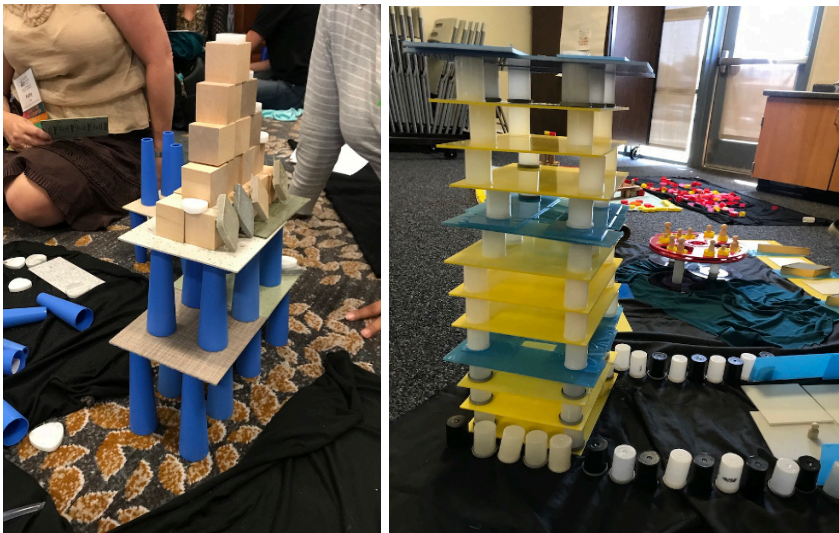
Self-active play is a term used to describe children’s and adults’ spontaneous play with open-ended materials, particularly reusable upcycled materials. As fingers fiddle with open-ended materials, the brain becomes engaged and focused as it sorts and creates order. The play space and the materials provoke natural curiosity, which activates the brain to construct new meaning (Drew et al., 2013).

### **From Play to Practice: Integrating Self-Active Play Experiences in Professional Development**

Self-active play offers immersive play experiences, deep reflection, dialogue, and practice with adult participants within professional development. The protocols of self-active play are found in further detail in the book *From Play to Practice* but generally include the following:

- A careful curation of a variety of open-ended play materials, including wooden blocks, natural materials, stones, shells, sticks, beads, and upcycled materials, such as caps, fabric, and other items gathered from local businesses. Workshop participants are prompted to relinquish any preconceived notion of the right or wrong way to play and that this is a time to allow their imagination and creativity to lead the way.

- There are 15-20 minutes of quiet, contemplative solo play with open-ended materials and quiet music, ideally at a tempo of 60-80 beats per minute.
- Time is then provided for reflection, journaling about the experience, and sharing it with others in the group.
- There are 20 minutes of collaborative play in which groups of three to five individuals play together, coupled with lively instrumental music.
- Time is then provided for reflection, journaling about the cooperative play experience, and sharing about the experience and play that developed with others in the group.



Over the past four decades, the self-active play workshop has been delivered in various settings, including state and national conferences, symposiums, and staff

meetings across the United States and in several other countries around the world. Each time, participants share how profoundly the time to connect with themselves, their inner thoughts, the materials, and others inspirational. Here are some of their comments.

*“I felt relaxed and creatively motivated for the first time in a long time. I was able to let go and let the materials lead me”* (NAEYC Self-Active Play Workshop Participant).

*“There was a peacefulness about the creative expression. Time ceased to exist in a very real and fabulous way!! I truly could have sat in this very space for an indefinite and lengthy period of time with happiness in my heart”* (Orange County Department of Education Self-Active Play Workshop Participant).

In addition to workshops and professional development opportunities, self-active play spaces at conferences have proven to elicit a sense of wonder, curiosity, engagement, and excitement for participants and facilitators to share the power of play for children and adults. Several such play spaces have been organized at the Florida Association of Young Children Annual Conference (facilitated by leaders of the FLAEYC Play Chapter) and the Orange County Association of Young Children Annual Conference. The play space allows conference participants to explore open-ended play materials. A play space is staffed by volunteers who are passionate about supporting play with young children. The volunteers bring open-ended materials to support a variety of play experiences, including but not limited to loose parts, blocks, art, light and shadow play, construction, sensory experiences, clay, paper, dramatic play, and more. Play spaces serve as a powerful tool for elevating the voices of local early learning and care providers and exposing attendees to the power of open-ended play firsthand.

*“This space is like an educator’s dream. It gives you fresh ideas for things you already have”* (Florida Association of Young Children Play Space Attendee).

*“So often at conferences you come and sit and learn. Having this space to engage, explore and play was amazing! It was great to have the time to create,*

*and to be inspired about ways I can support play in my classroom” (Orange County Association of Young Children Play Space Attendee).*



### **The Benefits of Self-Active Play**

“We are designed to be lifelong players, built to benefit from play at any age” (Stuart Brown, 2000, p. 48).

Play is essential in the lives of both children and adults. The process of self-active play is grounded in the understanding that adults, as well as children, have a basic human need to experience creativity, self-expression, curiosity, and joy. By offering time and open-ended materials, self-active play is a powerful tool for fostering resilience and innovation. Play is a way to establish new connections; it primes the

cortex to develop the neural pathways that create our physical, social-emotional, and cognitive capabilities. The more often children are in a play state, the more new brain circuits form and build their skills. Playing wires the brain for the skills we use our whole lifetime — physical agility, social confidence, emotional regulation, creativity, and resilience” (National Institute for Play). The same benefits can be said of engaging in open-ended play experiences for adults. The Institute for Self-Active Education has identified the following outcomes using hands-on play experiences with teachers.

Self-active play helps teachers:

- Cope with stress by energizing their practice, addressing burnout, and infusing them with understanding, energy, hope, inspiration, and creativity
- Grasp, examine, and relish the emotional and spiritual basis of teaching
- Discover firsthand how play helps children develop language, mathematics, science, and socialization skills
- Use developmentally appropriate practices to address early learning standards
- Realize how play leads children to become more resilient, empowered adults.

(Drew et al., 2013)

These benefits and the transformative impact of the play experience continue to be reiterated by play experience participants.

*“This experience opened my eyes to the power of play as a transformative tool, not just for children but for educators as well. It taught me that play is not just a fun activity but a profound way of understanding the world and ourselves. This realization has helped us change our practices at Kinderoo. We now prioritize creating environments where children (and adults) can engage in self-active play, exploring materials and concepts at their own pace. This approach has allowed us to witness incredible moments of learning and growth, where children have the autonomy to create and explore their own interest. The joy and freedom I experienced during the workshops are now shared with our children every day, fostering a love for life-long learning and wellbeing”* (Paola Lopez, Founder Kinderoo Children’s Academy)

As adults engage in open-ended play experiences, they develop a strong sense of play's impact in promoting self-awareness, mental wellness, and learning for both adults and young children.

*"It relaxed me. I let myself find ways to create and play without worrying about the outcome. I will observe more in my classroom. Children can problem solve, be creative, relax and feel satisfied in their own accomplishments through play. Open-ended materials create endless possibilities for children to explore, create and learn."* (Orange County Department of Education Self-Active Play Workshop Participant).

*"I had a sense of calmness. As the item was not coming out the way I envisioned I was able to switch gears and try a different approach to create and Item I was pleased with. This happened without becoming frustrated. The play experience gave me a sense of exploration and freedom."* (NAECY Self-Active Play Workshop Participant)

Additionally, the self-active play experience demonstrates a universality in promoting self-reflection and its application to teaching practices within a variety of cultural contexts and roles.

*"During my play time I felt peaceful, safe, and calm. It felt good to play with the materials I chose, and reminded me that I need to allow my children more choice in their play. I did not want the time to end. I was creating, exploring, dreaming, imagining. This is what the children in my classroom need more time to do."*

(Asian Hope School Cambodia Self-Active Play Workshop Participant).

*"This session just brought so much life into my somewhat dormant heart. 2021/2022 was a difficult year emotionally making my passion for teaching fizzle a little. This workshop woke up the purpose, the excitement, the gift of play. I will take every suggestion and daily implement them in my classroom and personal adult life. Thank you so much for reigniting the fir."* (ACSI Early Education Virtual Conference Self-Active Play Workshop).

*“There was no right or wrong. I was allowed to experiment and try new things. When something didn’t work, it didn’t matter. As a matter of fact, when my tower fell over, I smiled! No pressure. If I could implement this as a director (but maybe I already do) try and try again!”* (NAEYC Self-Active Play Experience Participant)

Experiencing open-ended play inspires educators and leaders to integrate play in their own lives and work with young children. The time of reflection after playing offers an essential aspect of adult learning: considering the impact of the experience and how that impact can be transferred into practices with young children.

### **Conclusion/ Recommendations**

By experiencing the power of play firsthand, adults can understand the importance of inviting children to engage in various play experiences. They can also reexamine their role in children’s play and become more cognizant of providing children the time and space to engage in self-active play. Integrating opportunities for self-active play during professional development, in college courses, and during staff meetings are practical and viable steps for caregivers to experience the incredible benefits of play. Providing a few moments to engage in open-ended play regularly will benefit our current and future early childhood workforce immensely. Integrating play spaces at conferences where attendees can freely explore and engage with open-ended play materials provides a powerful opportunity to foster wellness, creativity, and joy in early childhood.

Additional research regarding the benefits of self-active play experiences for children and adults would further amplify the necessity of open-ended, child-led experiences in early childhood settings and professional development. Empowering our early childhood workforce to engage in practices that bring optimism, healing, connection, innovation, and joy will significantly impact the trajectory of their lives as individuals, their work with others in the field, and their ability to offer rich and meaningful play experiences to young children.

For more information regarding Self-Active Play, the Principles of Self-Active Play and resources to support open-ended play scan here:





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## College Students Need to Play, Too! Understanding the Issues and Possibilities Within College-Aged Play.

Steph Dean and Julianne Wenner

*For some time now, there's been an odd assumption about formal education. A curious belief has taken root in the heads of policymakers and those working in schools and universities that higher levels of study should be a deadpan business with little time for fun. Apparently, as you grow up, it's important to smile only occasionally and laugh a lot less than when you were younger..." - Bill Lucas (2019, p. vii)*

### **Introduction: College Students Need to Play**

It is widely recognized that play is critical to the development of young children (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020), but this is also true for young adults (see Forbes, 2021; James, 2019; Leather et al., 2021). College-aged individuals can benefit from regular play as part of their day-to-day experiences, and many of the positive outcomes are similar to what is evident in younger children. When college students participate in play, they can experience a reduction in stress, enhanced creativity, increased academic performance/learning, authentic connections with peers, greater motivation and engagement, and an overall improved mood (Forbes, 2021; Gordon, 2014; Leather et al., 2021; Pang & Proyer, 2018; Togsverd & Pedersen, 2024). It has also been noted that playful adults live approximately ten years longer than less playful adults (Gordon, 2014). Despite these benefits, compared to younger children, there is not much research examining play in college students, particularly within certain countries and/or cultures (Yue et al., 2016).

In part, this lack of research is due to the difficulty in identifying playfulness in young adults compared to children (Barnett, 2007) but also may reflect the lesser value ascribed to play from a societal perspective as well as a perceived mismatch with the goals of higher education (Leather et al., 2021). There are several hypotheses about why play is not more commonly studied or discussed at the college level. Play can often

be seen as something that is childlike and not ‘worthy’ of adults’ time; engaging in play can seem lazy or indulgent and at odds with being ‘grown up’ (see Forbes, 2021). Still, others see the play to be in opposition to higher education’s oft-purported goal of preparing one for employability – despite the fact that employers consistently lament graduates’ abilities to think creatively and work collaboratively. Yet others note the complex connections between play’s alignment with elementary school notions of recess, the fact that recess is not teacher-led, and the traditional notion of the teacher as the transmitter of knowledge. If one is playing, one must not be learning anything (see Henderson, 2022; Leather et al., 2021). Finally, some educators have noted the significant effort that goes into planning and facilitating playful learning in their classrooms, making playful learning challenging to implement (Togsverd & Pedersen, 2024).

Still, college students have opinions regarding play and what they expect from their college experiences. Having fun through shared experiences is essential, especially experiences that include a sense of agency for the college student (Forbes, 2021; Whitton, 2018; Yenigun, 2014). Although play with college students might not be a current societal priority, it is important to consider the role of play in young adults’ lives and *how* and *where* they have opportunities for playful moments.

This position paper describes the current state of play for college students and advocates for additional opportunities for them to play as a regular part of their daily lives.

### **What Might Play at the College Level Look Like?**

Play is notoriously difficult to define, regardless of age level, but definitions generally coalesce around notions of choice, wonder, and delight (Mardell et al., 2016). When people play, they have some levels of autonomy or choice and are often intrinsically motivated to engage in play. There are also aspects of wonder in play, which can look and feel like curiosity, surprise, fascination, challenge, tinkering, or creating. Finally,

when people are engaged in play, there is often fun, laughter, happiness, excitement, and silliness. Eberle (2014) argues that “play would not be playful if it were not fun” (p. 224). There are some who may craft a false dichotomy between work and play or play and reality, but play scholars argue that play can exist in all spaces where humanity exists; playfulness is a state of mind and a way of being (Leather et al., 2021; Sicart, 2014).

And although play is often synonymous with positive, joyful outcomes, it should be noted – particularly when considering young adults – that play *can also* be

...dangerous too: it can be addicting and destructive and may lead to different types of harm...Play is a dance between creation and destruction, between creativity and nihilism. Playing is a fragile, tense activity, prone to breakdowns...Play is a movement between order and chaos. (Sicart, 2014, p. 3)

Sicart (2014) goes on to describe the inherent desire to push boundaries, break rules, test values, disrupt systems, and let go of rationality when playing, which is why play can be so “intoxicating” (p. 9). Given the increased level of freedom, abilities, and experiences adults have as opposed to children, it is important to also consider this ‘dark side’ of play when discussing college-level/adult play. To be clear, this is not to say that all college-level play is dark but that there are increased possibilities for choice, wonder, and delight in taking darker turns at the college level.

### **How and Where Are College Students Playing?**

It is no surprise that today’s generation of college students is highly connected to technology, given that they were raised in a tech-inundated world from birth until now. Young adults frequently engage in technology-based play on their phones, computers, gaming systems, and other electronic devices (Young Gamers and Gamblers Education Trust, 2019). Unfortunately, this often results in unhealthy addictions related to spending too much time on technological platforms, resulting in poor physical and mental health

effects (Lattie et al., 2019). Other playful ventures for college students include drinking games (Wegner et al., 2019) and play within sex/courtship (see Ryan & Mohr, 2005). Although understanding the ramifications of these types of games is beyond the scope of this paper, it is significant to note that college students *are* playing and that this type of play often takes on certain characteristics that may have some harmful outcomes.

College campuses are often structured to offer other options for student's playful behavior. For instance, more and more institutes of higher education are leveraging outdoor areas around campus to create spaces for students to use in various manners (Burt, 2021). This creates opportunities for outdoor pick-up games or organized gatherings such as chess, role-playing games, or other board games. College students also frequently have access to campus life events that are designed to be playful experiences intended to build relationships (Lubbers & Joyce, 2014). The National Association for Campus Activities (2024) publishes a periodical dedicated to campus activities, making its mission to provide enriching entertainment for college communities.

Despite busy schedules, young adults do find time to play outside of class time, and this play takes on a variety of forms. But what about play-based learning being integrated into regular coursework? We now consider options for play-infused learning activities and how some students are playing within their classes.

### **How are College Students Engaging with Playful Learning?**

Many college courses still maintain a traditional lecture approach to instruction that is the opposite of an active, learner-centered (Freeman et al., 2014). Yet there is evidence that institutes of higher education intentionally include play within college classes (Authors, under review). This is often the choice of the instructor or the particular program area, and so specific patterns have emerged regarding how and where college students are engaging with play-based learning within their classes.

Exploring studies related to play-based learning at the college level, teacher education programs are the number one area that embeds play-based learning into their coursework (Authors, under review). This is most often seen in early childhood education (e.g., Cohrssen & Tayler, 2016; Galbraith, 2022), but there are also other courses for the education of older students that include play-based pedagogies as well (Boysen et al., 2023). College students enrolled in teacher preparation programs often have moments within class wherein they experience play from a learner's perspective and then return to a teacher's viewpoint to consider its role. This modeling of a learning approach is common within education courses, and playful learning presents one type of pedagogical approach for college students in educational programs to learn.

However, there are other courses that include play-based learning. Science and engineering have found ways to incorporate play into collaborative work (Arnab et al., 2019; MacDonald et al., 2022). These opportunities present creative and playful moments for college students as they work with peers to design a product or solve a problem. This sometimes involves incorporating playful materials, such as LEGO Mindstorms, to teach key concepts like remote sensing or robotics (e.g., Gómez, 2011; Klassner, 2002).

Creative arts programs such as dance, film, writing, design, and theater are beginning to explore ways to enhance creativity by incorporating playful learning experiences (e.g., Henderson, 2022). Many of the play-based learning activities that creative arts instructors include are done so with the intent to enhance participation, improve motivation, promote creativity, and build a joyful learning community (see Choi et al., 2019; Henderson, 2022). Business management courses have also included gameplay to support learning around decision-making (Jhan et al., 2023).

Finally, college students enrolled in medical courses might be exposed to simulations and role play as a type of playful learning (e.g., Marchetti, 2021). It is uncertain how much joy or creativity is embedded into this type of play, as the end goal is to mirror

real-world experiences that students might encounter. Nevertheless, this type of learning goes beyond traditional lecture methods and holds the potential to be playful.

Unsurprisingly, many of the above-mentioned opportunities for playful learning within coursework involve games and game-based learning. College students are having more and more opportunities to engage with play through technology, including virtual reality, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence (e.g., Carpio Cañada et al., 2015; Ng et al., 2023). However, it remains unclear whether play-based technology used for learning has similar or different mental and physical health outcomes than students' more typical engagement with technology for fun.

## **Recommendations**

Although college students do have opportunities to engage with play both outside and within a class, the lack of studies and information around play at this level indicates that play is not valued to the same extent as with younger children. For play to be supported within college students' day-to-day lives, we make the following recommendations: (1) opportunities for play within campus life, (2) incorporating play into college courses, (3) shifting societal norms, and (4) conducting more empirical research on play at the college level.

### ***Opportunities for Play Within Campus Life***

College students engage in play during their free time, but some of this play may not contribute to their overall health and well-being. Instead of technology addictions or drinking games, college students should have opportunities around campus to engage in meaningful, beneficial play experiences. These might include organized activities that include whole-body movement, such as intramural sports or musical events. Organized playful activities in outdoor spaces around campus may also contribute to college students' experiences in/with nature, which research shows has many holistic positive outcomes (Lee et al., 2022). Yet play does not always need to occur outside, nor does it

need to be active in nature. Some colleges have designed art-related meetups, strategy game competitions, or activities related to learning a new skill. We suggest that all of these are viable options for providing college students with opportunities to play with peers in a safe, healthy manner.

### ***Incorporating play into college courses***

Although some college students might take advantage of playful experiences during their free time, it is imperative that college professors and instructors begin to rethink their course design, finding ways to embed play-based learning into regular class time. While certain college programs, such as education, engineering, and creative arts, are beginning to move in this direction, we believe that *all* college students should have similar opportunities. Research indicates that using games or open-ended imaginative projects can stimulate playful behavior in college students, inciting feelings of joy and delight, increasing engagement in the content, and creating a more supportive learning environment (Leather et al., 2021).

### ***Shifting societal norms***

There appear to be restrictive or negative societal norms regarding college students engaging in play (Forbes, 2021). Young adults may have different patterns from young children regarding how they play, how often they play, and where they choose to play, yet all types of healthy play should be celebrated by college students. To support play in this population, the general public should recognize the importance of play and move away from any negative stigmas related to playful behavior in young adults. This relates to all cultures and all countries; even though play might be enacted differently depending on the context, it is still an important part of life for college-aged students. Society should continue to promote play in young adults as being an important, worthy endeavor.

### ***Increased empirical research***

Data and evidence should drive colleges and universities. As such, more empirical research demonstrating the benefits of play and play-based learning at the college level



is warranted. In addition to describing benefits, researchers should clearly explain interventions used, programs created, and methods used to measure outcomes; this increases the likelihood that others will see the generalizability of these activities and trust the research findings. Further, researchers should explore what play looks like at the college level worldwide, as there may be lessons to learn from other systems and cultures.

## Conclusion

College students need to play, and it is critical to their development as human beings. The positive outcomes are holistic in nature and include benefits related to physical, social, and emotional well-being.

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## Play with College Students

Dr. Bernadette Pilar Zermeño

*"This is so fun! I feel so alive and happy," thirty-five-year-old Samatha said as she finished the class. Samantha is a single mother, a preschool educator during the day, and a college student at night. Samantha graduated high school and took ECE courses at the local community college but could not finish them. After twenty years of fear of returning to school, she knew, "It was time to go back for myself and my child. I was nervous because I did not have a good experience in high school." Like many marginalized students and adults, returning to school can be intimidating, scary, and extremely difficult. As a professor supporting multi-aged students in college, we remember the important issues students face while also modeling how to ensure play happens throughout the day in their current or future classrooms. Unfortunately, we find that students returning to school bring memories of the traditional classroom that they experienced, many of which were not playful, enjoyable, or fun.*

### Introduction

In early childhood and primary classrooms, we see less free play and recess for children (North, 2023). This loss of play, movement, and recess is a concerning trend that may negatively impact children's physical health, mental well-being, and academic performance. Play and recess are not just a break from learning; it's a crucial part of a child's day that allows them to build friendships, enhance cognitive functioning, and strengthen gross and fine movement development, all necessary for development and later academic success. When children lose recess and play time, they miss opportunities to interact with their peers, which is vital for developing social skills and forming friendships. Reducing play can harm children and adults mentally, physically, and emotionally. To regain the play we have lost in early childhood and primary classrooms, professors must model the importance of play in the college classroom. Regardless of age, play allows adults and children to explore, build on their imagination, and build collaboration (California Department of Education 2021).

Several factors have contributed to reducing play in early childhood and primary classrooms. These include increased pressure to focus on academic achievement, standardized testing requirements, and limited time and resources. Additionally, some educators may perceive play as unproductive or unrelated to academic goals, leading them to prioritize more traditional instructional methods over play-based learning.

However, research consistently shows that play-based approaches to learning are highly effective in promoting children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Integrating play into the classroom can enhance student engagement, motivation, and overall academic performance (California Department of Education, 2021).

Efforts to increase play in existing or future classrooms should not be left solely to educators. It is imperative that schools and policymakers play a role in supporting play implementation. This can be achieved by providing educators with training and resources on the benefits of play and strategies for incorporating play into the curriculum. Additionally, schools and policymakers can support play implementation by establishing policies that prioritize playtime in early childhood education. These policies should ensure that educators have the flexibility and support they need to integrate play into daily instruction (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, (2020).

Recognizing the importance of play in children's development and creating environments that value and support play can lead to more enriching and effective learning experiences for college students. In many college classrooms, adults sit longer while listening and taking notes. This makes it necessary to lead and model how active experiences and play are not at odds with each other but rather beneficial to their existing or future students' success. Future or existing teachers explicitly experience adult-based play in college courses. Then, they can incorporate and provide play and active learning experiences for children in their existing or future classrooms.



## **Importance of Play for Adults**

Research shows that play brings joy, laughter, and well-being, and it is not just for kids! Adults need it as well (Parker et al., 2022). Studies know that play reduces stress by triggering the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals (Parker et al., 2022). It promotes relaxation and helps shift your focus away from every day worries. Play encourages imagination and creativity. Just think of Google and Tech companies that allow employees to work on an activity that inspires creativity and joy. Employees are given a choice (Stewart, 2013)! Imagine if college students had more choice and play in the virtual or in-person classroom (North, 2023).

Joy and laughter help improve relationships because you share fun experiences to boost connections and communications and deepen relationships to speak about new ideas and push others' ideas. Essentially, play supports all aspects of adult life to promote healthy well-being, so teaching playfulness to college students can benefit their overall well-being and academic success, which will hopefully transfer into their future prenatal-five-year classrooms.

## **Approaches and Strategies**

Our college courses should have integrated playful activities in each class session that support students' achievement of the course competencies. Integrating playful and active experiences establishes a routine and ritual that can be used in their future classrooms. For example, start each class with a low academic filter question to help educators connect and share ideas about themselves. Educators, like children, love making personal connections while helping build respect and well-being with their classmates. Each class starts with small group community building or questions like - "What kind of french fries do you like?" or "What is your hashtag for today?" Create a news report about your day that is just two minutes." These fun questions help educators promote a sense of self-expression and creativity, just like one does through

play. Also, children and adults will feel a sense of safety when learning in a space with routines and well-organized environments.

Another example that can be used in person or a virtual classroom with college students would be incorporating dance or movement at each class session. Through Brain Dance (Gilbert, 2000), educators take short breaks and engage in dance to help refresh their bodies while modeling language development. Brain Dance is a fun and playful activity that students can integrate into their classroom (Gilbert, 2000).

The final suggestion is to “flip the classroom” (Arnold-Garza, (2013), whether in-person or virtual. This idea moves away from the traditional classroom structure of the professor as the expert and holder of all the knowledge. The professor ensures that most of the time is spent in active learning experiences that foster higher-order thinking. For example, all classroom activities should allow students to express their knowledge or questions in fun and engaging ways. Last week, my students created a song and dance to share the idea of teaching math and using counting collections in early learning classrooms. This creates a playful learning environment where we, as college professors, design classroom spaces and activities conducive to playing and exploring complex text and theories. When we allow these spaces, we recognize and celebrate instances of creativity, innovation, and collaboration among students, just as one would do in an early childhood classroom setting.

## **Conclusion**

Play is essential for both children and adults. The time is now to model, enjoy, and have fun with college students. More than ever, college professors must integrate play into college classrooms to ensure future educators can recognize the benefits of play and incorporate play into their future classrooms to help students cultivate essential skills such as creativity, resilience, collaboration, and stress management. Ultimately, by providing opportunities to play in college classrooms, professors will enhance student well-being and academic success and lead by example.

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# Decoding the Collegiate Mental Health Crisis: Embracing Playful Pedagogy and Valuing Playful Campuses

Lauren Sundstrom

## Introduction

College students across America are experiencing unprecedented levels of mental health challenges (Wang, 2020). This paper presents statistics defining the collegiate mental health crisis, touches on its probable causes, and recommends play-based solutions to improve mental health and student life more broadly.

## Mental Health Situation

According to a 2021 *Healthy Minds* survey involving 90,000 respondents across 133 campuses, 44 percent of college students registered feelings of depression, 37 percent reported experiencing anxiety, and 15 percent have reportedly considered suicide. These statistics represent the highest categorical measurements in the survey's history (Cornett, 2023). Further, more than 60% of college students have reportedly met the criteria for at least one mental health problem (Lipson, 2022), and nearly 75% of students reported moderate or severe psychological distress (*National College*, 2021).

Gen Z – comprising those born after 1996 – is more willing than previous generations to seek treatment for mental health and may be more willing to report their struggles than previous generations, possibly affecting statistical surveys.<sup>1</sup> As treatment has become more necessary and widely accepted, college campuses are responding by increasing access to counseling services. Still, the demand for services is higher than the supply despite campuses employing creative solutions like teletherapy (Abrams, 2022; Matherly, 2024).

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<sup>1</sup> A recent *New York Times* op-ed blames collegiate anxiety on parents, stating “...parents are suffering from anxiety about anxiety, which is actually more serious than anxiety” (Ross, 2024).

## **Mental Health and Student Retention**

The Center for Collegiate Mental Health's 2022 annual report found that students experiencing mental health challenges were more likely to drop out, often lacking motivation, withdrawing from social support systems, and suffering declining academic performance (Center for Collegiate Health, 2022). A National Society of Leadership and Success report concurred, citing a 2016 Danish study finding men with poor mental health were five times more likely to drop out, a statistic the global pandemic has since accelerated (Hrala, 2022). "There's a grand bargain between students and institutions," said Jerome Lucido of the USC Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice. Universities thrive when students enroll and graduate, and when students withdraw, both sides suffer (Soika, 2020).

## **Probable Causes of the Collegiate Mental Health Crisis**

Thought leaders, including Jonathan Haidt, maintain the current collegiate mental health crisis is not due to the college environment itself but instead is rooted in students' childhood and adolescent behaviors. In his most recent book, *The Anxious Generation*, Haidt maintains that "overprotection in the real world and underprotection in the virtual world" are heavy contributors to Gen Z's mental health challenges (Haidt, 2024, p 9). Although Haidt's recent concerns focus on the perils of social media, he is also an advocate for childhood autonomy, stating, "children need a great deal of free play to thrive...[t]he small scale challenges and setbacks that happen during play are like an inoculation that prepares children to face much greater challenges later" (Haidt, 2024, p 7).

Leading psychologist Peter Gray disagrees that social media is a primary cause of mental health issues (Gray, 2020) but concurs that the lack of free, self-directed play is harming young people, resulting in diminished adaptability and resilience (Gray, 2015 and 2023). Additional contributory factors include concerns over climate change (Plautz,

2020), political division and instability (Abrams, 2022), and the continued fallout from the global pandemic, including income inequality (Pandya, 2022; Benny, 2023).

### **Solutions: Taking a Holistic Approach to Wellness**

Kevin Shollenberger, inaugural Vice Provost for Student Health and Well-Being at Johns Hopkins University, maintains institutions must now think holistically about how to support students. "It really has to be everyone's responsibility at the university," he says, "to create a culture of well-being" (Abrams, 2022).

Further, R. Brad Martin, former University of Memphis (UofM) President for whom its award-winning recreation center is named, maintains, "[w]ellness is at the core of what a great school is supposed to be all about" (Curtis, 2021). UofM's on-campus recreation prioritizes fun and flexibility to enhance mental and physical health (Hartmann, 2023). In addition, President Hiram Chodosh of Claremont McKenna College (CMC) stated during a 2023 Town Hall that community, purpose, and play are the pillars guiding CMC successfully out of the pandemic era.

### **Solutions: Specifically Incorporating Play on Campus**

The mental (and physical) health benefits of play at all ages are well documented. Play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith indicated the opposite of depression is play, partly because play involves "the willful belief in acting out one's own capacity for the future" (Sutton-Smith, 2001, p. 198). The science of play confirms play as a means to help lift college students from their troubles and to help prevent mental health issues from arising in the first place (Holzman, 2016).

Leading play expert Dr. Stuart Brown recently named play an "urgent public health necessity," comparing a "... lifetime of play to keeping immunizations up to date. A health and wellness imperative, play has a protective effect against frailty in mind, body,

and society...the time we spend playing is more like an investment than an expenditure" (Eberle & Brown, 2024, p 3, p 39).

In part to address the collegiate mental health crisis, leaders are recognizing the power of play and incorporating it specifically in at least two areas: through playful pedagogy, involving professors embracing playful teaching techniques, and by pursuing more playful campuses, where avenues for students and faculty engagement in playful triggers are more abundant.

### **Playful Pedagogy**

Dr. Brown, who taught for many years at Stanford's Hasso Plattner School of Design, maintains, "As we grow older, we are taught that learning should be serious, that subjects are complicated. Serious subjects are complicated. Serious subjects require serious study, we are told, and play only trivializes them. Sometimes the best way to get the feel of a complicated subject is to play with it" (Brown, 2009, p 101).

In that spirit, the University of Colorado-Denver Assistant Clinical Professor, mental health counselor, and play therapist Lisa K. Forbes co-founded Professors at Play (P@P), a global multi-disciplinary faculty group with 800+ members aimed at transforming collegiate pedagogy using the power of play. She writes that play can be one way to support students' well-being...[it] cultivates a warm classroom environment with trust and safety. Play's presence reduces stress, fear, and anxiety. It balances out the seriousness of learning so students can approach it from a centered place. Play awakens students' motivation and excitement to learn, making the material more intriguing. Students who are motivated and feel safe become vulnerably engaged and are more willing to take risks, make mistakes, and receive feedback. When students are allowed this type of learning environment, their learning becomes self-directed, personal, and meaningful...play can be...a superhero in education (Forbes, 2021).

Forbes and her colleague David Thomas have compiled a repository of playful approaches for professors to consider, grounded in the science of play. A comprehensive approach to teaching at the college level, their book includes bite-size suggestions like incorporating a song of the day, ping pong office hours, a Halloween photo booth, cartoons of the week, paper airplanes, virtual escape rooms, and role-playing. Each suggestion has been tried successfully, sometimes resulting in more authentic conversations, demonstrated vulnerability, and increasingly invested students (Forbes & Thomas, 2023).

Further, Forbes's *The Process of Play in Learning in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Study* concludes

1) play is underutilized and devalued in higher education, 2) play cultivates relational safety and a warm classroom environment, 3) play removes barriers to learning, 4) play awakens students' positive affect and motivation, and 5) play ignites an open and engaged learning stance to enhance learning (Forbes, 2021).

Forbes's research and practice led her to create the Playful Learning Process model (see Figure 1). It outlines playful learning's probable effect on reducing anxiety and stress, creating community, and enhancing learning by awakening intrinsic motivation.



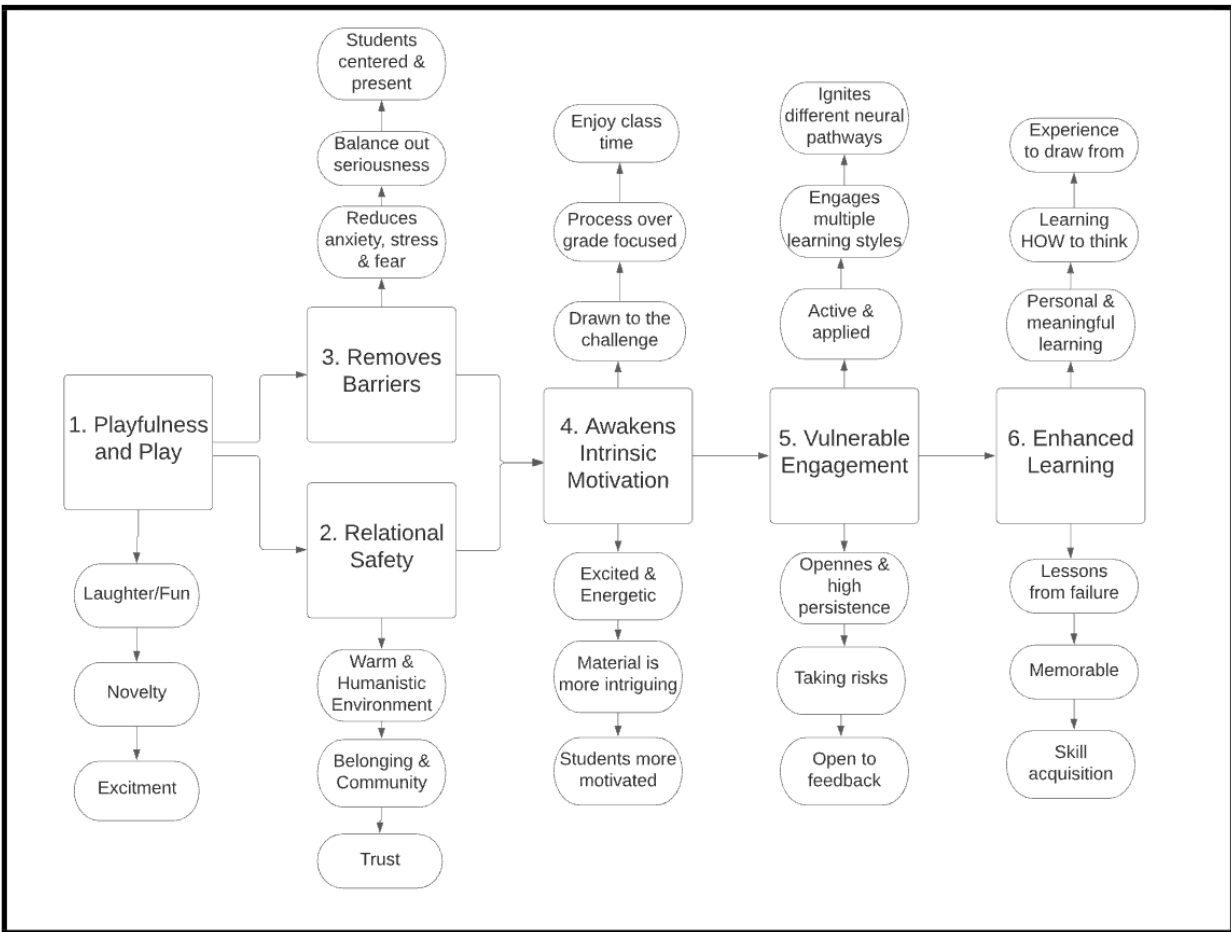


Figure 1. The Playful Learning Process Model (Forbes, 2021).

Forbes and Thomas have also found that playful pedagogy can improve professor morale, thereby improving overall campus morale (Forbes & Thomas, 2023).

### Playful Campuses

As illustrated above, incorporating play in the classroom can reduce anxiety, stress, and fear while unlocking the power of play in learning (Forbes, 2021). As stated previously, colleges and universities are increasingly prioritizing recreation to improve mental and physical health, create community, and make college more fun. Beyond the traditional recreation center, universities are also considering campus features to welcome spontaneous play for even a few minutes during a walk across campus.

This effort to incorporate "triggers" is grounded in neuroscience, which recognizes that play behavior is already embedded subcortically in the brain. Dr. Jaak Panksepp, famously known as the "rat tickler," discovered neonatal decortication did not diminish play in juvenile rats (Panksepp, 1994). As Dr. Brown elaborates, "We don't need to learn how to play, we just need to find ways to activate it" (Eberle & Brown, 2024). Further, Brown states, "Your play circuits are unique—a combination of the wiring you were born with and the neural pathways that developed in your brain during childhood. You can return to that joy even if it's been years since you were in a play state. It only takes a little self-awareness and the willingness to 'just do it!'" (Eberle & Brown, 2024, p 39).

Building on this concept, the University of Denver (D.U.) is undertaking a campus pilot project to install two swings (see Figure 2). The swings – built to hold college students and customized with D.U.'s logos and colors –encourage individual, social, and cooperative play, offering spontaneous permission to access one's play nature for even a moment between classes or events. D.U. is putting into practice what play experts know: maintaining mutual eye contact plus spinning, twisting, moving, and the feel of flying all have the power to improve mood, reinforce positive neural pathways, and more (personal communications, 2024).



Figure 2. Courtesy of GameTime, a PlayCore company.

Additional play triggers that campuses are considering include outdoor musical instruments.<sup>2</sup> Tuned to the pentatonic scale, these instruments welcome all skill levels individually or together. They are designed to trigger a state of play in students with far-reaching benefits (see Figure 3). Further, an elaborate intergenerational playground for unintended or planned fitness, fun, and community building to complement indoor recreation facilities offers promising change. These outdoor facilities, installed at Virginia Tech, are also intended to help students capture additional time in nature.



Figure 3.  
Imbarimba, Courtesy of Harmony Park.

D.U.'s leadership supports a more playful campus to address mental health and D.U.'s "4D" mission. 4D is D.U.'s multifaceted approach to holistic education. 4D rests on helping students 1) advance intellectual growth, 2) pursue careers and lives of purpose, 3) promote well-being, and 4) explore character (*Four Dimensions*, 2024). D.U. is capitalizing on research indicating free, self-directed play can boost each of its 4 dimensions, and leadership is embracing play as an underutilized education tool.

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<sup>2</sup> In *Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us*, Susan Magsamen writes "Dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin released in the making of music and art can help to relieve anxiety and depression" (Magsamen, 2023).

## **Conclusion: Formally Recognizing Play's Benefits on Campus and in the College Rankings**

Each year, entities, including *U.S. News and World Report* and *The Princeton Review*, consider metrics like retention and graduation rates, class size, financial resources per student, and employability to rank America's colleges (Zuckerman, 2024). Rankings are increasingly controversial and arguably flawed, but most colleges and universities remain driven to improve their rankings (Diermeier, 2023), and many incoming students and employers rely on them. UCLA's *Daily Bruin* reports, "A higher ranking can result in an increased budget, and conversely, an increased budget can also lead to a higher ranking" (Gu, 2024). In recent years, rankings have expanded to consider student mental health, primarily measured by counselor-to-student ratios and availability (TPR, 2024). In the U.K., Humen.org surveyed students and investigated mental health staff training to create specific university mental health rankings (Humen, 2023). Other ranking systems attempt to measure student happiness or a school's "party" atmosphere (Niche, 2024).

The National Institute for Play (NIFP) maintains that colleges and universities have much to gain using the power of play. Schools incorporating play as a tool to improve mental health and capture additional benefits will thrive better and should be rewarded within college rankings. Factors such as playful pedagogy and intentionally playful campuses should be considered and explicitly valued, as these factors will raise campus excellence and drive enrollment up. A play ranking could stand categorically alone or could support established metrics like student retention. It is worth reiterating that play does not reduce the rigor of a discipline or course or take away from what needs to be learned – in fact, it is quite the opposite (Forbes & Thomas, 2022). The science of play confirms it can ease mental health challenges and its vast corollary benefits. Finally, Figure 5 outlines the benefits of play, each applicable to improving college student life on all fronts. As these immense benefits become broadly recognized, leading higher education institutions seeking greater excellence can and will implement play.

### **Benefits of Play:**

Enlivens And Energizes Us

Renews Our Sense Of Optimism

Opens Us To New Possibilities

Fosters Learning, Creativity, Innovation

Sustains And Strengthens Relationships

Cures Boredom And Living In The Mundane

Increases Productivity

Improves One's Mood

Diminishes Self-Consciousness

Allows For Fresh Insights And Perspectives

Increases Acquisition Of New Knowledge

Makes New Cognitive Connections

Teaches Emotional Intelligence

Encourages Flexibility, Adaptability, And Resilience

Figure 5. (Forbes & Thomas, 2022).

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## **Bringing Play Back to Middle School: How Board Games Boost Learning and Emotional Growth**

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### **Introduction**

As students reach middle school, they often see a decrease in time centered around play in favor of worksheets and quizzes. Recess and play have decreased since 2001, and over forty states do not require students to have recess. Middle school lesson plans focus more on presentations and exit tickets to assess student knowledge instead of unique play opportunities. One possible reason for this shift is that schools are expected to increase standardized test scores, and play is not seen as a way to prepare students for those tests. This common misconception can have drastic, negative impacts on students (Nix, 2022). Play is how younger students learn about the world around them. For older children, removing play reduces the focus on social-emotional learning (SEL), hindering empathy development (Bongiorno & Quinn, 2021). Instead of embedding SEL development into the students' classroom, it is often relegated to enrichment classes, such as art, or even less effective, into an entirely separate learning environment. All of this is to prepare emerging secondary students for high school, college, and the future job market. This common misconception hurts a child's creative development, which is needed for children to be successful both within the classroom and outside of the learning environment.

### **Background**

Middle school classrooms must have play consistently embedded in the student's daily experience to develop cognitive thinking connected to creativity and SEL. Embedding play means play is commonplace versus used as rare lessons. Play should be as prevalent for students as physical worksheets are commonplace in the typical secondary classroom today. This type of play can be content-focused through board games, role-playing games, or artistic elements. It can also be used in any subject. For example, students studying probability in math have a plethora of board games that use

dice or chance as a way to win while problem-solving and developing content knowledge. These games help students grow academically and emotionally, which is connected to success as they approach adulthood.

Play is a critical tool in helping middle school students develop through social-emotional learning, yet it is ignored in place of preparation for college and standardized tests. Social-emotional learning aims to help children understand their thoughts and emotions and foster empathy for their community (Nix, 2022). As students reach middle school, educators expect them to understand their feelings better than their elementary-aged peers. However, this belief neglects to address each individual's developmental differences. The shift away from play and, in its place, the use of worksheets means fewer chances for restorative sessions such as teaching empathy and respect. This creates an unsafe learning environment as students cannot express their needs clearly, and educators assume any negative actions are intentional. Maslow described the need for a safe learning environment as the second step in an individual's approaching self-actualization (Witchita State University, nd). Allowing for opportunities to teach middle school students how to express their emotions constructively will help every stakeholder in the classroom.

### **Appropriate Approaches**

To address the lack of play in middle school classrooms, teachers should include interactive board games to teach content and increase social-emotional learning. Board games are, by nature, a method of communication and problem-solving that encourages students to consider new avenues of winning depending on various factors. Since most games are based on securing victory points or achieving a goal, students must apply statistics, social cues, or deduction knowledge to win. Whether it is a new strategy they have researched or a new line of thinking to try and outwit opponents, board games require students to think outside the box in a way that worksheets do not.

Different content can focus on other styles of board games to help students learn content or apply SEL. The first example is one often used in history classrooms: Diplomacy. This game replicates the situation of World War I as players take on the role of the different world powers. During each round, players make deals and alliances with

other countries, such as "I will attack Player X if you promise not to attack Player Y." This is meant to simulate the secret alliances of the war. However, in the true fashion of World War I, none of the deals have to happen. Players do not have to fulfill any promises they make during the game. At first, this may seem like a means to teach students how to lie. While there might be lying in the game, Diplomacy teaches players how to handle disappointment, make long-term plans, and deal with unexpected difficulties. These elements are a factor in SEL that is difficult to teach (Long, 2023). Through this game, students can develop these skills while gaining content knowledge.

Another game that can be used in place of worksheets is the award-winning game Just One. It is a party-style game where one player has to guess a word based on clues from the rest of the group. Each member of the group gives a one word clue. However, if any words match or accidentally use part of the original word, they are removed, making it more difficult for players to answer correctly. This type of game is great for English Language Learners or students looking to expand their vocabulary in middle school classrooms. If the group wants to succeed, they must think of complex words. For example, if the word is "mountain" and several students simply write "tall," it will be near impossible for the original player to guess the clue. However, with practice, they may come up with other words such as "rocky," "large," "snowy," or "geography." These types of word games can help students expand their language abilities while also playing and building SEL, as they must work as a team to succeed (Long, 2023).

Finally, another way to reintroduce play in middle school classes through board games is the implementation of role-playing games, such as Dungeon and Dragons. These role-playing games originated in the 1970s but have seen a rise in popularity as hundreds of similar role-playing games, such as Star Wars, Call of Cthulhu, and GURPS (Bawa, 2022), have become more common and accessible. In these role-playing games, the teacher takes on the role of Game Master, where they determine the game's events based on the students' decisions. For example, students in a history-based game may be confronted by a historical figure and required to use content knowledge to determine how to avoid conflict or convince them to support a decision. After they decide their actions, the teacher has them roll dice to determine the

outcome. Sometimes, the dice roll may be positive, allowing the group to proceed. Other times, it may fail and cause unforeseen circumstances.

In the same way as Diplomacy, it forces students to deal with adverse outcomes and work as a team to find solutions. However, the most significant benefit of role-playing games in the middle school classroom is they allow students to live history. They take on the role of a historical figure, use knowledge to make decisions that make sense to solve the story, or even predict what will occur. Finally, it allows students who struggle with passive daily worksheets, readings, and writing tasks to demonstrate the knowledge gained through an active learning process.

While all of these game options will benefit students' learning, it is essential to note that they must be selected with rigor and content in mind (Vaughan-Southard, 2024). Rigor is a term used to describe difficult or complex work that requires different skills. For example, a rigorous hiking trail may have more challenging climbs and hills or last longer than its simpler counterparts. In the classroom, educators sometimes create lessons they believe are rigorous by adding higher-level texts or more writing. Instead of achieving the goal of more rigorous instruction, students will often see this as simply more passive work.

In contrast, content-specific board games will promote complex thinking needed to achieve rigor in ways that motivate interest in the student. Silly party games are often luck-driven and require less complex thought; one can quickly point to Candyland or Chutes and Ladders as examples. However, games that relate closely to content can reinvigorate the desire for learning that schools are working towards, especially in the middle school classroom.

The more the game relates to content, the more invested all parties become. Teachers can encourage creativity and new interests in their students. Parents will see their children have more desire to attend school as they will not be required to do daily worksheets, and students will be excited to work with their peers in new ways. Worksheets can take away passion or creativity since schools often use a repetitive theme to prepare students for testing.

In regards to SEL, these games inherently focus on a growth mindset. If students never push themselves past their initial plan or strategy, they will fail. Being successful can only come through observation, listening to their peers, and accepting each mistake with as much patience as a middle schooler can possess. Above all else, these games and styles of play teach students that it is okay to fail as long as you try to create solutions. Even adults worry about how it will look if they fail a task. Middle schoolers have the additional fear of how their peers will receive them. In these games, working together is often the best solution, meaning everyone succeeds or fails together. Through play, these students will learn that failure in a task does not mean they will be rejected, disrespected, or outcast. Instead, this play style will allow students to work as a team to learn and grow (Conyers, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

Learning should be engaging, interesting, and meaningful. The purpose is to have students of all ages question the world, build problem-solving skills, and even build connections with those around them. When schools remove play from middle school classrooms, learning loses its pleasure. Anyone who has taught middle school has seen avid readers put down books, hard-workers drift off into apathy, or curious minds shut down. One's stage of development plays a role, but the endless cycle of completing worksheets, only to be tasked with more worksheets, is what will stop learning altogether in students. The question you should be asking is, where do I start?

Play must be incorporated as the primary teaching strategy as often as possible. As Generation Alpha grows, so must educators' teaching methods. Teachers prepare students for jobs that do not yet exist but will require creative solutions. Repetitive worksheets do not foster creativity or problem-solving; play will be instrumental in bringing creativity back into learning.

In conclusion, including board and role-playing games in middle school classrooms is an alternative to traditional worksheets. It is a needed strategy to foster creativity, engagement, and social-emotional learning. Board games like Diplomacy and Just One and role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons provide dynamic, interactive platforms for students to apply their knowledge, develop critical thinking

skills, and enhance emotional intelligence. These games create a learning environment where students are motivated and empathetic. Embracing these strategies ensures that education remains relevant and deeply impactful. As educators, the commitment to including play into the daily curriculum is an investment in the development of our students, preparing them not just for tests but for life.

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## Play with Infants

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### Abstract

This paper aims to provide information needed for advocacy for those seeking to advance the state of infant play. The first step involves understanding the value of play for infant growth and development. This sets the stage for creating environments and play interactions with adults to stimulate play. Stimulating infant play enhances growth, development, and the overall quality of life.

### Introduction

Play is an essential part of the infant's life. After health and safety needs are met, the infant plays. They explore, play, and return to explore some more. The infant touches the adult's face, which makes a large oval with their mouth, and the infant tries to pull their hand away. This sort of game can be observed across cultures as infants and adults engage in games that increase bonding and attachment. These interactions contribute to the transmission of language and culture. Scholars have found that play contributes to developing social and cognitive skills, language, and emotional well-being (Neale et al., 2018). Unfortunately, infant fingerplay games that were common for centuries have all but disappeared.

As many new parents will acknowledge, infants do not come with instructions, so many turn to the latest information on the internet for materials or equipment to aid them in providing better care. Many businesses thrive by providing products for infants. For example, carriers for newborns are now available and can be placed in car seats, strollers, and highchairs. The price ranges from fifty dollars to two thousand plus dollars. Although these are designed to keep the infant safe in different environments, they are also used as a replacement for adults. Look around at any business, park, or public facility; you will see infants in strollers and at least one adult talking or texting on the phone. If the infant protests, they are given a phone or tablet to distract or entertain them!

Replacing human interactions with technology is problematic because infants learn through play and exploration. From the first smile, which occurs around three to four weeks, to the laughing episodes that occur when the child is older, interactions with adults during play provide joy while developing multiple pathways to growth and development. Research supports the value of play for social, cognitive, and physical development (Neale et al., 2018).

So, how can we change how parents and adult caregivers engage children? How does play fit into this picture? To answer this question, we need to understand the critical role of play for infants, consider how best to encourage it, and share this information broadly. In this way, infant play enhances healthy growth and development while adding to the quality of life of both the infant and caregiver.

### **Value of play in the life of an infant**

Play is a natural part of an infant's life. The infant's daily activities generally include feeding, diapering, and care that creates a safe and healthy environment in which the infant is held, talked to, and enjoyed. Play creates a natural way for adults to interact with infants. Play and exploration generally begin with the onset of smiling, usually seen between the third and fourth week of life (Sluss, 2018). Once the infant smiles in reaction to the adult's interaction with them, exploration and back-and-forth play begin in earnest. Adults serve as prompts for the infant, and the infant responds to the adult. These interactions lead to laughing, bonding, and fun for all (Feil et al., 2020).

*On a plane ride recently, I heard an infant crying, and I turned to offer a bit of comfort and support as I had held infants on different plane rides when the adults were exhausted. Imagine my surprise when I realized the adult did not want help as they ignored the infant while talking on the phone. The infant's cries became louder and louder, to the dismay of the other passengers, but the parent continued to talk on the phone. The flight attendant intervened and asked if they could hold the infant, and the parent finally put the phone down. Imagine what the infant is learning. Is the phone more important than I am? Being responsive to an infant's*

*needs is a critical part of development. Without it, infants struggle to form trusting relationships.*

## **Research Supports Infant Play**

Research supports that infant play contributes to the infant's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth in six essential ways:

Bonding and attachment. Adults are concerned with the survival and care of the newborn when they enter the world. For this reason, touch and interaction are most important at this stage as infants and parents engage in the dance, which leads to attachment. Play provides a conduit for touching, talking, and enjoying the child. Adult infant bonding and attachment provide security and a platform for the child to explore the world (Neale et al., 2018).

Trust. Infant play involves a give-and-take process. Infants develop trust in the adult as the adult hides their face and reappears during Peek-a-Boo. This type of play cultivates the development of emotions and trust, leading to predictability so infants can understand and make sense of their world. Trust is established during the first year of life as the infant develops a bond with an adult who serves as a secure base from which the infant explores their world. When the infant can predict what is occurring, they strengthen the neurological connections in the brain (Feil et al., 2020).

Brain growth. When infants play, their brain grows. The infant's developing brain is stimulated when interacting with others, exploring, and initiating action on objects. When the infant explores the rattle or the stuffed bear, they act on the object and explore making discoveries about how to make sounds or how things feel. They are developing their understanding of the physics of dropping something and watching it fall. When this occurs over and over, neurological connections are strengthened. They also establish

neurological functioning when they repeat actions over and over. Play encourages repetitive activities, such as tossing a ball or knocking objects off a table (Sluss, 2018).

Physical development. During play, children move, stretch, throw, creep, crawl, climb, walk, and run. These movements encourage the development of gross motor skills. They also develop fine motor skills by grasping, tossing, and experimenting with toys. Restricting infants' movements by placing them in restrictive devices such as baby swings or Exersaucers prevents physical development (Sluss, 2018).

Language and communication skills. Infant play includes talking, laughing, singing, reading, and playing games with words, which develop the syntactical structures necessary for language development (Feil et al., 2020).

Cultural transmission. Intergenerational play has provided a conduit for transmitting culture through songs, music, and poetry shared from one generation to the next. Each culture has specific traditions to ensure that infants have the tools to survive in their environment. Aim to pass on your culture by using musical and hand games from your culture (Sluss, 2018).

Avoiding prerecorded entertainment such as YouTube, Tablets, or Television creates a situation where the marketplace determines the infant's musical heritage, and the joy of interaction in playing with an adult is lost. When the infant plays, the infant develops the brain, physical dexterity, communication skills, social skills, love, and joy. It is not an overstatement to say infants need play (Sluss, 2018).

## **Appropriate play with infants: How to make it happen**

### **Play for newborns (0-3 months)**

Because attachment is the most critical goal for newborns, holding, talking, and interacting are necessary. Playing with a young infant often involves imitating the infant's actions, eye-to-eye contact, and talking to them in soothing, loving tones. The newborn reacts, and the game of give and take with adults begins. Playing games that involve touching the face, arms, legs, or the whole body in movement is critically important. The newborn uses the sense of sight, hearing, and touching with their mouth to explore and understand their world. Play should focus on what the child can see and hear. Holding the infant, smiling, talking to them, and pointing out different things they can see are all forms of play. As they discover their feet and hands, their body becomes a toy. Touching their feet together, patting their hands together, and using nursery rhymes are fun, but they also facilitate brain growth and development (Sluss, 2018). Play at this age is initiated by the adult and maintained based on the child's reaction. Gentle play is designed to soothe and stimulate at the same time.

### **Play for three- to six-month-olds**

The infant moves from non-mobile (lap baby) to mobile (cruiser) between three and six months. This changes the type of play that can occur. Around the three-month milestone, infants babble, laugh, and try to get attention from adults when their needs are unmet. When all needs are met, including sleep, the infant benefits from the adult who holds, sings, and plays with them. Now, adults can also engage in floor play. The primary type of play at this age is object play. Object play for three to six-month-old infants involves objects like rattles, teething toys, or other toys the infant can hold. It ranges from young infants grasping and mouthing anything within reach to toddlers stacking blocks and older children playing with a kitchen set and play food (Hester, 2019).

Infants at this age need to be on the floor and able to move freely. Floor play can occur in any safe area for the infant. Remembering that they are beginning to move and can move quickly! At this age, the infant enjoys rattles and other materials that have a

cause-and-effect action. Adults can engage them by throwing a blanket over an object and then taking it off, to the infant's delight. Because they learn about the world through exploration, they benefit from things that move when touched and shiny and brightly colored objects that make noise.

### **Play for six- to nine-month-olds**

Around six months, the infant generally sits up most of the time and is interested in moving from one place to another when on a flat surface. The infant must have opportunities to move on the floor or in a safe space throughout the day. They need opportunities to explore their world to continue to develop. At this age, the main types of play are playing with objects that fit into other objects, balls, soft toys they can throw, teething rings, and soft books.

At this age, children are not only mobile but can also crawl and explore at a rapid pace. Adults should read short books, show pictures in books to build vocabulary, sing, do fingerplays, cuddle, and enjoy this fantastic age.

### **Play for nine- to twelve-month-olds**

As the infant closes in on the one-year-old mark, they begin to stand alone and walk with assistance. This mobility changes how they can play. Now, they can cruise, climb, and begin to walk. Play changes. At this point, they can engage in sensory play with water, sand, and paint. Toys that make music when touched, more complicated things to spin or that pop up when manipulated, toys they can push and pull, baby dolls, and dishes are all age-appropriate. Avoid using iPads, Tablets, or other technology.

Play during the first year of life is vital for the child. No other period in the child's life will see growth occur as rapidly as during this time. For this reason, adults need to know that play is as essential as food and sleep for the developing child. Play allows the child to make eye contact, talk, engage, and understand their world.

## Conclusion

The infant arrives ready for interaction with the adult. When the adult finds ways to bring joy, laughter, and fun into the infant's world, they get it into their own. Sharing these special times with an infant creates a positive, trusting relationship that will reap benefits throughout the child's life.

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## Play Across the Lifespan – Defining Play – Play with the Primary Grades

Joanna Cemore Brigden & Stephanie Marlett

### Introduction

The 20th-century image of children running free with friends for hours is rarely seen anymore. Children's time at and away from school is filled with structured activities, after-school classes, and homework (e.g., Holland et al., 2021; Fischer et al., 2020). On top of that, primary students are given less time for play and recess throughout their school day. Adding to this lack of freedom, some primary schools have eliminated recess, and many who offer it erroneously withhold recess as punishment (Thomas et al., 2024; London, 2019).

Underrepresented children attending schools in communities with lower socioeconomic status are even more at risk due to less access and greater restriction of recess as a disciplinary strategy (Tsai et al., 2024; Galaviz et al., 2021). The importance of unstructured playtime in primary schools should be recognized and promoted. It is not just a break from academic work but a crucial part of a child's physical and mental development (Bristow & Atkinson, 2020; Yogman et al., 2018).

### Definition of Play

The definition of play as a disposition notes six distinguishing factors of play: intrinsically motivating, process-oriented, guided by what can I do with this object? Primary-grade students can also pretend, free from external rules, while actively engaging in play (Rubin et al., 1983). Children under seven grow and develop these dispositions through play as the foundation of all future learning. Cognitive changes emerge around the age of seven, and the child can now THINK and engage in play (Vygotsky, 1978). The shift from predominantly pretend play and constructive play to games with rules occurs during the primary ages of seven through ten. These changes parallel children's cognitive development (Rogers & Sawyers, 1992). This cognitive development is a crucial aspect of a child's growth and is significantly influenced through play.

When children play, they choose to engage in play in accordance with their individual development across the cognitive, physical, language, social, and emotional domains, as well as their biological maturation, interactions, and experiences. Changes in play also occur based on the child's level of control and involvement in planning and adding ideas (Garvey, 1977). Each of these changes, in combination with the child's drive to play, helps them make sense of new information, feel competent, and experience joy (Garvey, 1977; Whitebread et al., 2009). Play *is* the unique way these various factors come together for healthy development. Vygotsky philosophized, "As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form" (1967, p. 16).

### **Concerns With Our Changing Landscape**

In today's readiness climate, a child's primary-age experience offers less play at school, less at home, and less in the community. This has resulted in significantly less time dedicated to engaging in the single most necessary source of development: child-initiated play. A sizable obstacle is the changing perception that play is a break from academics versus the reality of the critical contributions to development that occur during play. How today's primary-age children spend their time has drastically changed. One of the most devastating changes is a marked decrease in child choice and play. This has resulted in deprivation of what children need for the healthy development of their whole personhood. Play is a basic need and should not be viewed as a luxury or an option. (Groos, 1898, 1901).

Decades of research steadily support the need for play opportunities to augment children's developmental growth during the primary years. Professional organizations that advocate for children agree with the consistent findings produced by these studies and conclude that children need more, not less, play. The International Play Association (IPA) laments that play is "one of the least known, least understood and least recognized rights of children, and therefore one of the most consistently ignored, disdained and violated rights in the world today" (IPA, 2008, p.3). The US Play Coalition believes that "play is essential to a person reaching his or her full potential.

“Unfortunately, an erosion of the value of play has occurred in modern society, and we are beginning to see the negative impacts of this devaluation” (Kutska, July 10, 2010, Presentation- US Play Coalition). Given the high value associated with play in academia juxtaposed against the deteriorating view of the need for play in practical learning settings, staying informed on play research and policy is imperative.

## **Ways to Ensure Play Opportunities for Primary-Age Children**

Recognizing that we must fight for play is the first step in advocating. Speaking at the 2024 Free to Play Summit, Nathan Wallis summed up the core of the fight: In his session, Wallis discusses a prevalent issue. ‘We have a society and culture that is a bit obsessed with the frontal cortex. There is a vast difference between what the research says and what the culture says. We are not fighting a war of research. There are very clear benefits of play; there is no disputing that. The fight is against the culture’ (Wallis, April 2024, US Play Coalition Presentation. Play Advocacy begins with actions by those working with children in schools, at home, and in other settings.

### ***Actions In School Settings***

Promoting play-based learning in a formal primary-grade learning environment is central to developing the whole child. Educators retain a positive perception of play, but these perceptions are not generally transferred into their instruction (Ranz-Smith, 2007). Teachers often lament that they are confined to their rigid curriculums, captive to textbooks, worksheets, and grade-level shared lesson plans. Educators need to advocate for play, which shifts the impression that learning is boring to learning can be more fun, more engaging, and more memorable.

Teachers can curate play-based learning opportunities for students while simultaneously meeting instructional requirements imposed upon them. How? Make space within the school day for invention, imaginative exploration, collaborative games, inquiry-seeking, problem-finding, and autonomous fun.

### ***Follow Students Interest***

Engage students through passion-based learning. Provide support and resources and let students guide their learning. Let children be the teachers,

explaining a concept they researched and providing an engaging accompanying activity. Rather than assigning book reports, allow each student to present their book in a creative way that excites them. Maybe it's a diorama. It could be in the format of a television commercial. Offer autonomy at every opportunity.

### ***Get Active***

Exchange the traditional spelling quiz for a spelling relay where teams choose challenging words for their opponents to spell. A game of charades is always a fun way to guess a historical event or a science phenomenon. Memorizing facts about acceleration and collision from a physics textbook is not nearly as effective as designing a device that will prevent an egg from cracking when dropped from ten feet in the air.

### ***Role-play***

Allow students to act out scenarios, problem-solve in the moment, explore perspectives, and adapt learning strategies.

### ***Assign Play***

Homework can be ineffective in bolstering academic achievement and often results in stress and fatigue, leading to a loss of interest in a topic and lessening a student's recreational time (Cooper et al., 2006). Instead of assigning homework, assign play! Have students design a game out of household supplies, sculpt an animal out of recycling, throw a tea party for their pets, or make up a scavenger hunt and have a family member try it out.

### ***Spend Instructional Time Outside***

Rethink traditional ideals of where learning should take place. The limitless boundaries of the outdoors are ripe with opportunities for teacher-supported risk-taking, open spaces to move freely, and discovery-based exploration. Incorporate nature as a resource – turn sticks into tally marks and acorns into counting manipulatives. Plan a scavenger hunt. Incorporate physical education into your ELA lesson. Breathe in fresh air during a group mindful meditation. Integrate the weather into a STEAM unit. Be creative. The sky's the limit – literally! And on top of all of this...

### ***Prioritize Recess***

While instructional play-based learning is advantageous for promoting student engagement and achievement, unstructured free play is also an essential learning strategy. When strategically placed between instruction critical recess periods, offer relief from cognitive overload. Playtime is instrumental in cultivating opportunities for autonomy, competency building, and healthy risk-taking. Through unstructured play, learners acquire the unbridled freedom to explore their inquiries, follow their curiosities, and discover new interests.

### ***Actions At Home***

At home, when children have the freedom to spend their time as they please, a significant amount of that time should be dedicated to play. Active play, not passive screens, TV, or tablets! Active play is fun and engaging. Moreover, play is so much more. With every jump of hopscotch imperfectly outlined in chalk on the driveway, large motor skills are refined; with every treasure map drafted by little fingers, fine motor skills become more acute. As siblings negotiate how their fictitious characters interact with one another in the fantastical environment they set in their chosen context, their interpersonal communication abilities soar.

Unfortunately, as children reach the primary grade, parents' emphasis on play decreases, and household play becomes less prominent (Warash et al., 2017). Additionally, overprotective parents are not as willing to permit risk-taking, preferring less adventurous play at the expense of autonomy and competence-building (Cevher-Kalburan & Ivrendi, 2016). Given the immense benefits of child self-directed play, it is worthwhile for parents to strategize ways to incorporate more frequent active play opportunities.

### ***Schedule***

Playtime can be maximized by intentionally carving out spaces for play. A sporadic trip to the park after school is a delightful shift in routine that promotes imaginative play and allows children to create, invent, and explore. Organizing playdates with classmates allows friendships to grow and play to expand past school boundaries. Permitting extra minutes of unstructured playtime with peers after an extracurricular activity strengthens relationships.

### ***Be Flexible***

Disrupting a child in the middle of play can be jarring and frustrating, potentially leading to emotional dysregulation. Negotiate the extra time they need to wrap up their play before whisking them away to run errands. Reevaluate the number of organized activities your child is enrolled in and consider swapping some for informal play.

### ***Find the Time for More Play***

Incorporate play into your daily routines – invite your children into the kitchen while preparing dinner and cleaning. Sprinkle your child in magic fairy dust that gives them the unique power to organize their room. Playful parenting increases cooperative behavior in children, making things like brushing teeth more palatable. Increasing moments for play can stimulate imagination, improve connections, and support all aspects of a child's growth.

### ***Allow Freedom***

Parents can enhance the quality of play, thus optimizing developmental benefits. Allow children the freedom to initiate their play, limiting boundaries and restrictions whenever possible. Support autonomy by providing resources they can access without help (such as coloring materials, scrap paper, recyclables for crafts, blankets for forts, etc.). Allow for healthy risk-taking and bring awareness to their uncertainty. Can they climb that tree without losing their footing? Could they scrape their knee in the process? Maybe! That is okay. Letting children make decisions based on their level of uncertainty will build their resilience and self-efficacy. Through informal play, children can make mistakes (celebrate them!), learn from their failures, and develop their competencies.

### ***Actions in Other Settings***

Learning occurs in many informal educational settings, such as museums and zoos, during scout meetings, extracurricular activities, summer camps, and sports seasons. Instructors, counselors, troop leaders, coaches, and volunteers who work directly with children are also responsible for bolstering a child's potential for learning. Promoting play in a collaborative environment is a joyful and intentional way to stimulate a child's cognitive growth and interpersonal skillsets.

These "other settings" are unique in that they are not schools or homes. This

uniqueness has its own set of challenges and opportunities. Leaders in this area can utilize the above strategies for schools and homes as appropriate.

### ***Recognize***

Recognize the uniqueness and consider the timing. When and where are children coming to your setting? If they come from school, they may need some unstructured time before focusing on the activity.

### ***Assess Practice and Expectations***

Assess where children can direct their play and examine your expectations. In doing so, you may increase your ability to reach each child and improve the outcomes and goals you have while improving your children's development.

### ***Increase and Enrich Play Opportunities***

Bring fun! Let children model new skills. Present the opportunity for them to have firsthand experiences. Teaching a sewing class? Sit them at the sewing machine and hand over the controls. Let children have a say in their learning and how they want to play. Give them choices in how they receive content and their associated activities. Permit them to decide who to work with, the materials they want to use, and how they want to create, imagine, and learn. Let children lead and try out different roles. Choose flexibility over rigidity in structure when possible. Make space for unstructured play before and after structured activities. Most importantly, have fun! If you enjoy what you are doing, you will cultivate an environment for creative and engaged learning.

## **Conclusion**

Play is a critical element for developing primary-grade children's social, cognitive, physical, language, and emotional development of youth. Play during these primary years makes a pivotal shift from being the way children think and behave into being something they do in addition to thinking and behaving. Vygotsky distinguished play as "the source of development... the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives" (Vygotsky, 2016, p. 18). For more than 100 years, research on the importance of child-initiated play has provided educators and parents with abundant research that unequivocally

supports the necessity of formal and informal play for our primary youth. Despite this research demonstrating the benefits of extended playtime, the latest trends show a decline in the quality and quantity of play- at home, in school, and in other settings. This White Paper is a call to action and advocacy for those in roles that directly work with children and all who care about children.

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## The Power of Play: Nurturing Self-Regulation in Children

Sharon Jackson

### Introduction

This White Paper will explore the relationship between play and self-regulation and provide practical strategies for enhancing it. It will also examine how child-directed play strategies can support and grow self-regulation skills in young children.

### Issues

Challenges with play and self-regulation are concerned with more than just those topics and their intersection. They involve the family and society. In the busy lives of young families of the twenty-first century, time is at a premium. With more than one job to consider and multiple activities that occur after work, childcare, or school hours, the actual time to relax and allow children to play at home is challenging. Sometimes, it is the parent's schedule, and sometimes, it is the child's "extracurricular" schedule. Busy children and busy adults have become the norm in our society.

With hectic home schedules and school, childcare programs are the most likely places for child-initiated play. However, those settings can be ruled by other things that force play to be lower on the priority list. This list can include special activities (gymnastics, language, or music classes) or academic activities prescribed by the curriculum or expected by families or governing boards. Another circumstance that can inhibit play time is actual places to play.

Neighborhood parks and playgrounds are less accessible in some areas and unsafe in others. If parents are uncomfortable with the play areas in the neighborhood, children remain inside. Of course, happy play experiences can take place in homes, but we return to the previous discussion of available time.

Technology is one of the biggest threats to children's opportunities to play, and it can exist in the home, school, or childcare setting. Though technology is a part of

our daily lives, electronic devices have become the standard entertainment for children in many situations, replacing child-initiated play. Determining the best use of technology (which may be none) or limiting access to technology is a challenging task for families. It also poses a significant challenge for schools and childcare programs.

## **Background**

The Inspired Treehouse website asks an interesting question as they seek to support those working with or living with young children. Their question: *Are these some of the difficulties you see with the children in your world?*

- Listening and paying attention in the classroom
- Following directions
- Interacting with peers and adults
- Transitioning between activities
- Tantrums or meltdowns
- Calming their brains and bodies
- Problem-solving and flexible thinking
- Understanding and processing emotions

These challenges are not unusual in any space with children. While they are difficult to deal with, some strategies and approaches can assist both the child and the adult.

In recent years, dysregulation among kindergarten children and expulsion from preschool has increased (Blair & Diamond, 2008). The data is staggering, and the situations are incredibly concerning from societal and educational perspectives. The increases in dysregulation can be attributed to executive function deficiencies. Fortunately, improvements can take place with support for the development of executive functioning.

The concept of executive functioning and self-regulation in early childhood involves a clear definition and consideration of its importance in the lives of young children.

Self-regulation refers to managing thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in a way that allows success in day-to-day activities. Blair and Raver (2012) define self-regulation as both top-down processes or executive function skills and bottom-up regulation of thoughts, feelings, and behavior, which are influenced by emotion and stress. The tools needed to accomplish this skill are executive function tasks. According to the Center for the Developing Child, the executive function processes of impulse control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility work together to establish a child's self-regulating ability. This accomplishment of self-regulation is ongoing—it does not develop all at once or quickly (Kroll, 2019). Children must feel safe and respected as they learn and grow within their home or educational setting. This can be accomplished by creating and nurturing positive relationships, implementing consistent routines, and engaging learning opportunities in all areas of their development.

The most effective way children learn to monitor and regulate themselves comes from child-initiated play experiences. Foundational descriptions of play and learning interaction come from Piaget and Vygotsky and more current writers and researchers. From Jean Piaget (1962), we see the basic tenets of child-initiated play:

- pleasurable
- spontaneous
- voluntary
- intrinsically motivated
- flexible
- a natural product of physical and cognitive growth

Lev Vygotsky (1978) describes play with these elements:

- desired by the child
- "always involves an imaginary situation,"
- "always involves rules" (which are in the minds of the players and may or may not be laid down in advance).

From Jerome Bruner, we take the importance of scaffolding learning situations and activities; from Lev Vygotsky, the Zone of Proximal Development shows that we must, through our observations and reflections, create environments that will allow growth to occur naturally. These two concepts work together to create a rich learning environment where the learner is viewed through the lens of "the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behavior; in the play, he is, as it were, a head above himself" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.102).

From Peter Gray (2017, p.220), a more modern thinker, we get these descriptors: -

"an activity is play, or is playful, to the degree that it contains the following four characteristics (1) That is, play is (1) self-chosen and self-directed, (2) intrinsically motivated, (3) guided by mental rules that leave room for creativity, and (4) imaginative.

Play experiences can also have a variety of purposes—some intended and some which come organically from the experiences of the participants. These include:

- Solving problems
- Interacting and negotiating with others
- Processing emotions
- Taking risks
- Flexibility
- Resilience
- Self-direction

## **Approaches**

Specific steps are required to create an environment that fosters the development of executive functioning, self-regulation, and agency,

- Be intentional in planning to ensure that social-emotional skills that will

develop self-regulation are available through play and other natural learning opportunities.

- Provide a sense of safety and security—physically and emotionally.
- Offer the right kind/amount of stimulation that is purposeful and at the right times.
- Support children without stepping in without invitation or without giving the child or children the chance to solve a situation or organize a practical solution for their play.
- Be relaxed and playful as you interact and observe the children. Be present, respectful, and, if asked, be willing to participate.
- Meet the child's needs quickly, whether communicated verbally or nonverbally—Be observant so that you can alleviate frustration when possible, but also allow the child to have agency over his own needs and wishes in his play.

An acronym from Rita Weiss (1981) is a good reminder for working with any child:

**S** = Silence

**O** = Observation

**U** = Understanding

**L** = Listening

Each step exhibits respect for the child and allows the observer to invest deeply in what is happening with the child.

Several strategies can help provide opportunities for children to develop self-regulation. These include providing opportunities for children to have:

**Practice in Decision-Making and Problem-Solving:** Children often encounter



situations requiring decision-making and problem-solving during play. This could be negotiating rules in a game, building structures with blocks, or navigating social interactions in pretend play. Through these experiences, children take part in decision-making processes. This process will cause the children to consider consequences, plan, and adapt their ideas and materials to the situation. Experiences like these provide valuable practice in self-control (which leads to self-regulation) and making thoughtful choices.

**Exploration of Emotions and Social Skills:** Play offers a safe, supportive environment for individuals to explore and express a wide range of emotions. Through imaginative play scenarios, children can experiment with different roles, perspectives, and emotional responses. They learn to regulate emotions by managing conflicts, expressing empathy, and cooperating with others. Playful interactions foster the development of social skills such as sharing, taking turns, and resolving disagreements, which are foundational to effective self-regulation in their lives.

**Flexibility and Adaptability:** Play often involves spontaneity and improvisation, requiring children to be flexible and to adapt their actions and responses. This could be changing rules in a game or accommodating other players' preferences in a collaborative activity so that children learn flexibility in their thinking and behavior. This flexibility leads to growth in their ability to regulate their impulses and shift between different tasks or roles, an essential aspect of self-regulation development.

**Self-motivation and Engagement:** Based on the definitions and thoughts above, play is intrinsically motivated, driven by children's interests, curiosity, and enjoyment. Children are more likely to demonstrate sustained attention, persistence, and enthusiasm when involved in personally meaningful and enjoyable play activities. Intrinsic motivation promotes self-regulation by fostering a sense of autonomy and mastery. It also encourages children to set and pursue their goals in the play setting.

and overcome obstacles.

**Regulation of Stress and Arousal:** Play is a natural outlet for releasing pent-up energy, reducing stress, and regulating arousal levels. For example, physical play activities, such as running, jumping, or rough-and-tumble play, help children discharge excess energy and tension, leading to relaxation and emotional balance. Playful experiences also stimulate the release of endorphins and other neurochemicals associated with positive mood and stress relief. The experiences also foster emotional resilience and self-regulation in the face of adversity.

**Strategies:** An early strategy to use with the youngest children as they develop language is to expand their vocabulary by labeling actions and toys during play. Giving names to items and emotions helps them master language and social/emotional concepts.

Establish community in the group by fostering peer interactions and assisting the children (and their families) to build relationships with like-minded friends as a beginning step. Allow children a variety of times to choose their own play partners, hear one another contribute to a conversation or group discussion, and learn to notice and appreciate one another.

Invite a child to take turns with you and their peers to offer practice for social skills and support interactions. This can be accomplished in organic situations or as specific guided moments. Provide role-play examples and opportunities to illustrate social learning. Work through disputes with intentional language and offer ways for the child to learn when the conflict has been resolved. It is important to remember that a child in a challenging situation must first feel safe. Slow, low-pitched, kind words are the first step in defusing a peer-to-peer conflict or an individual upset. Teach conflict resolution proactively and avoid stepping in to assist unless necessary.

Promote persistence by guiding the child to a solution when things get difficult, empathizing by expressing how hard or frustrating it is when tasks go awry, and then

gently helping them refocus on the task or play activity.

Expand the play by careful observation and knowing your children well. Plan specific time for observing social partners, groups, and outliers. Create or provide new or different props. Offer changes in location if that seems to be necessary...enlarging the space is often a way to enlarge the roles children are playing. Create experiences that can allow participation of varying group sizes.

Encourage more complex thinking by giving hints for a new play idea or technique or by making connections to things in real life. Allowing a child's ideas to be the next step is validating and necessary for their self-esteem. Follow the interests of children by listening to requests that may come from collaboration and conversation. Be respectful of play as it is happening; join only when requested and follow directions provided by the players.

## **Conclusion**

Self-regulation is an essential skill for school and life success. To support children as they mature and learn how to deal with negative situations, disappointment, and challenging interpersonal relationships, adults must start early and serve as strong and resourceful guides for the children around them. Build opportunities regularly for children to discuss and practice self-regulation strategies as appropriate for their age. Offer play scenarios throughout the learning environment for children to experience growing opportunities. Be vigilant throughout the day for situations that might escalate. Allow children to handle challenging circumstances independently but be ready to assist with suggestions without taking over. By modeling healthy responses, ensuring assistance as needed, and creating safe environments, adults can provide essential support as children learn to handle and regulate their emotions.

There are myriad resources for self-regulation support. Among the best and most family-friendly sites is The Inspired Treehouse website, which is listed in the references. It provides a book list and other resources. Written by two occupational therapists, it includes books, games, activities, research, and other helpful pieces for

school, center, and home.

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## **Airborne Rocks and Downed Block Structures: Is it Challenging Toddler Behavior, or Is it Toddlers at Play?**

By Bethene Edwards MS. ECE

### **Introduction**

Often, parents and educators misunderstand infants and toddlers at play. A block or stick is thrown, and the adult corrects the action, assuming it is random behavior. The parent or caregiver might ask, why is my toddler dumping toys and materials all over the room after I have just cleaned it up? Another adult might question why their toddler spins in circles repeatedly or why that same toddler pours milk into their mashed potatoes. What is happening here?

The answer is toddlers are at play! When toddlers throw objects, twirl, climb on furniture, and knock over block towers, they engage in important development work in Play Schema. Often, these behaviors are redirected and viewed as negative behaviors when, in fact, they are critical components of cognitive development and constructing knowledge of how the world works. When adults lack an understanding of toddlers at play, these important behaviors are often disrupted and discouraged. Critical learning opportunities are denied to the child. The key to understanding and supporting toddler play is education in play schema.

### **Play Schemas**

Play experiences and repetition build strong neural pathways that lay the foundation for brain development. Much of toddler play results from urges the toddler cannot control to engage in repetitive motions and behaviors. These behaviors are called play schema, first observed and recognized by Jean Piaget. (Beloglovsky & Daly, 2015)

In *Schemas: A Practical Handbook*, Laura England states that “schemas are patterns of behavior that allow young children to construct knowledge and understanding of

how the world works, e.g., you may notice a child consistently dropping items from a highchair or persistently throwing things across a room. Both are signs of schema exploration as young children make sense of how items work and how their bodies affect change.”

There are countless schemas that children engage in at all stages of childhood. Nine well-documented and observed play schemas are noted in children’s play and first emerge in toddlerhood. They are transportation, rotation, enveloping, trajectory, enclosing, connecting, positioning, orientation, and transformation. (England, 2015) Schemas serve to assist in the formation of brain development and as a means of mentally organizing and connecting knowledge. (Beloglovsky & Daly, 2015).

Trajectory is the urge to throw objects. We often see older infants and toddlers squeal with delight as they toss a rock they have found outdoors or a plate they acquired from a shelf in home living. As the child throws the object, they learn how things move through space.

In transportation Schema, toddlers move things from place to place. This may be a dump truck they push around the playground or a favorite push toy. They may move a pile of blocks from one location to another. They are learning that they can transport things from point A to point B. In the process, the child builds a mental representation of what it is to move things about. Brain development at work!

In the enclosing schema, the child fills containers with objects. This is seen when a child fills a purse with blocks or a cup with beans at the discovery table. Toddlers will fill containers then dump them. In this activity, children learn that objects fill space. Toddlers will enclose their whole bodies when they climb into boxes or crawl into small spaces.

Toddlers are drawn to playing with circular objects such as wheels, balls, and round blocks. They may also enjoy spinning and twirling. This is evidence of Rotation Schema. These behaviors lay the foundation for mathematical and scientific thinking and proprioceptive and vestibular sensory development as they spin and twirl their

bodies.

The Enveloping Schema is explored when a child covers things in fabric or blankets. They may drape themselves in a scarf, cover a baby doll with a blanket, or drape sheets over chairs. They may then hide in the structure they created. Engaging in enclosure schema as well.

A connecting schema is noted when a toddler builds a tower with blocks and connects Lego or magnetic blocks together. They may use tape to stick things together. They may also disconnect their work by knocking down the tower or destroying their structure. In this process, children are learning the fundamentals of constructing things.

In positioning schema, the toddler lines up objects. These may be a line of loose parts, a row of small cars, or a line of rocks they have gathered outdoors. This activity can help us note the beginnings of patterning and mathematical thinking.

Orientation schema can be seen when toddlers climb—and they do climb on everything! The toddler seeks to view the world through different vantage points, gaining new perspectives. Toddlers will crawl over and under things, stand on stools, hang upside down, and place themselves in all kinds of positions in orientation schemas.

Finally, we have Transformation, where the toddler explores messy play! It might look like adding milk to their mashed potatoes to see what happens. They may mix dirt and water for mud or sand and water. The toddler explores how things can be added together to change into something different.

### **How to Support Schema Play**

When we watch toddlers play, we frequently observe all the play schemas. As you read this, you may think of examples you have seen in your toddler classroom or home environment.



The best approaches to supporting play schema and toddler play are to allow ample time for toddlers to engage in free-choice play, create indoor and outdoor play environments using materials and equipment options that afford toddlers the ability to engage in play schemas and guide children at play with intentionality and in support of the learning that is taking place through play schema work.

Free-choice play is defined as play that is child-led without adult direction. The child is free to use materials in any way they choose. There is no intended outcome for the play work. In this type of play, the child will be intrinsically drawn to activities and play experiences that they need at that moment for their own learning. In free-choice play, children will engage in play schema naturally and often.

The environment plays a key role in toddler play. It must be equipped with ample containers, loose parts, and small spaces for enclosing schema. Scarves, lightweight blankets, and fabric pieces of all sizes support enveloping schema. Small step stools and steps of varying heights indoors and climbing logs, stumps, or low platforms outdoors support a toddler's need for orientation.

Placing push toys, riding toys, wheelbarrows, and buckets in outdoor spaces and containers, loose parts collections, purses, bags, and shopping carts indoors allows for transportation and enclosing. Large boxes, baskets, and creating small spaces and nooks between furniture or in the large plantings outdoors invite toddlers to enclose themselves!

Blocks, Legos, and train sets support the connection schema. You may even find toddlers stacking sticks, rocks, or small stumps. The toddler may line up these same items to meet the positioning schema needs. Loose parts collections are ideal for exploring play schemas.

To support rotation, gather circular loose parts such as large wood rings, large buttons, muffin tins, and pompoms to set up an invitation to play. Wheels, balls, and ramps to roll things down also support rotation. Hula Hoops and low hills afford opportunities for spinning and rolling on the playground.

The sensory table is an ideal place to work with the transformation schema. Soil and water can be combined with various scoops, spoons, and containers for mud mixing. Cooking projects, glue work, and paint are all satisfying ways to experiment with transformation. Any messy play is a transformation schema at work!

Support trajectory schema by providing balls of varying sizes, bean bags, balls of socks, or large soft pompoms. While playing indoors children can toss objects into baskets or at a specific target. Allow children to toss sticks, loose parts, bits of leaves, or mulch. If another person is not too close, it is safe to allow the testing of these materials.

When a safety risk is present as a child engages in schema play, simply redirect the child to a similar activity, making it safe for the child to explore the schema on which they are working. For example, if a child throws a rock across a space with a risk of hitting someone, ask the child to toss the rock into a bucket or towards an area free of children at play. If a child is climbing on a surface that is unstable or too high, redirect the climbing to a lower surface, such as a step stool or low platform in the classroom. Let the child know why redirection is necessary using simple and understandable language. It might sound like, "When you climb on the shelf, I worry that it may fall over and hurt you. It is ok to climb on these step stools. They are safe." We cannot stop children from engaging in schema play. These are urges children have that are related to development. Educators simply need to make it safe for the child to explore.

## **Conclusion**

Toddler play is best supported by an adult's understanding of play schemas, the role schemas play in cognition, and how to support toddler development. Those who support toddler staff should provide opportunities to observe these schemas in action. They need to help staff recognize that child-initiated play and the development of schemas are more critical than flashcards or other inappropriate activities. They should also help toddler staff acknowledge that much of toddler behavior is related to schema development,

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# The Transformative Power of Adult Play in Early Childhood Education Programs

Miriam Beloglovsky

## Executive Summary

Academic pressures and budget constraints, alongside the demand for high-performance standards, have pushed educators to the brink of burnout. With a career once characterized by passion and creativity now overshadowed by paperwork and bureaucracy, many educators are walking away from their calling in search of financial stability and job satisfaction in other professions. Yet, amidst these challenges lies an opportunity for transformation. By reimagining the role of play in teaching and educators' lives, we can usher in an era of creativity, playfulness, well-being, and joy that aligns with the core values of early childhood education.

## Introduction

In a world where achievement is often measured through quantitative output, the emotional and creative aspects of the educational vocation have been neglected. This white paper argues that reintroducing play as a fundamental aspect of an educator's experience can dramatically improve their professional and personal lives. Increasing the value educators place in play can reignite their passion for teaching and promoting the pedagogy of care.

As early childhood educators, we are experiencing an identity crisis. We have worked hard to gain recognition for our work and achieve higher compensation. We are also constantly pushed to join practices that compromise the values we hold close to our hearts—the values of play, joy, creativity, empathy, and compassion. Yes, we want professional recognition, and we also want to advocate for what we know is best for young children. We want to embrace our creativity and adopt the pedagogies of play and care, which we understand can sustain and change children's lives.

As a profession, we must regain our identity and focus on what we know brings joy to children, families, and communities. We must recognize that every interaction with young children is powerful and filled with teaching and learning exchanges. It is time to

regenerate our profession and end the identity crisis collectively. We do not need to define education as memorizing the "word of the week" or reciting calendar components. Instead, we must reclaim the power and privilege of giving children a love for play, contact with nature, unscripted materials, clay, art, construction, sand, water, and mud. Let us enjoy moving, singing, rhyming, and imaginative play. Let's create fantasy worlds that stretch our creativity. Let's connect and build friendships and meaningful relationships. We must join and invent a new language that describes the pedagogy of play and care. We must lean into playful, transformational leadership and play to create a playful culture. We have to redefine what teaching and learning are about so that we can protect, honor, and respect the culture of childhood. In other words, we must create a culture of playfulness where educators can freely bring their best to work.

In the demanding world of early childhood education, educators' well-being and satisfaction are essential to promoting effective nurturing and development in young children. With increasing challenges and stress in educational environments, fostering a culture of adult play within the workforce is a compelling strategy to enhance job satisfaction and retention among early childhood educators. This paper explores the multifaceted impact of adult play on teaching professionals, underlining its potential to transform educational settings by promoting well-being, creativity, and resilience.

## **The Problem**

The realm of education is fast-paced and ever-changing, putting immense pressure on educators. They constantly face a barrage of demands that take a toll on their mental and emotional well-being. This pressure cooker of expectations and responsibilities is a significant obstacle to their work-life balance.

Moreover, the education system constantly evolves and adapts. The constant need for adjustment and the lack of support can create an overwhelming and stressful environment in the profession. This has significantly increased the stress levels among educators, affecting their overall job satisfaction.

Inequitable resource distribution adds another challenge to the drive to adapt. In underprivileged communities, where resources are already limited, educators are further burdened with the responsibility of providing quality education to the children in their care. The lack of adequate resources affects the children's learning experience and increases the mounting pressure on educators.

Consequently, this creates a vicious cycle where educators in underprivileged communities face unequal opportunities and more significant hurdles in providing quality education. These challenges profoundly impact children's academic achievement and inflict considerable emotional distress on educators.

As demands, changes, and limited resources chip away at educators' well-being, society must acknowledge and address educators' unique struggles and pressures. Providing ample support, equitable distribution of resources, and promoting a healthy work-life balance are essential steps in ensuring educators can thrive in their profession and continue to inspire the next generation.

### **The Argument For Adult Play and Playfulness**

At the same time, play is disappearing from educational systems. Children are required to sit and complete workbooks, and their play time is reduced to short periods throughout the day. When educators discover the benefit of play in their own lives, they will be more open to transforming early childhood ecosystems into more playful communities. The concept of neoteny presents a compelling argument for a radical shift in early childhood ecosystems. Neoteny, the retention of juvenile characteristics into adulthood, not only distinguishes humans from other animals but also holds the key to unlocking and nurturing the innate genius within each adult. At a time when standardization threatens to stifle individuality and creativity, British-American anthropologist Ashley Montagu's insights into neoteny offer a beacon of hope and a challenge to educators to rethink the role of play in learning.

In his seminal work, *Growing Young*, Ashley Montagu argues for the crucial role of neoteny in human development. He suggests that the human capacity to retain childlike

qualities, such as curiosity, playfulness, and flexibility, into adulthood is not a sign of immaturity but a unique advantage. These qualities, Montagu posits, are essential for social development, innovation, and problem-solving.

The concept of neoteny challenges the traditional view that maturity means abandoning playful exploration in favor of seriousness. Instead, it celebrates the idea that adults can "grow young" by nurturing the traits often associated with childhood. This perspective has profound implications for education, where the emphasis frequently lies on rote learning and conformity rather than on fostering creativity and critical thinking. "When this process is carried over from physical traits to behavioral patterns, human beings can revolutionize their lives and become for the first time, perhaps, the kinds of creatures their heritage has prepared them to be—youthful all the days of their lives" (Montagu 1989, Kindle locations 75-77).

When we observe children, we see some notable characteristics that, as adults, we may want to replicate and embrace. Curiosity is one of the most important because it leads to positive change and innovation, imaginativeness, playfulness, open-mindedness, willingness to experiment, flexibility, humor, energy, receptiveness to new ideas, honesty, eagerness to learn, and perhaps the most pervasive and valuable of all, the need to love (Montagu 1989).

Play is crucial in adulthood because it fosters adaptiveness, creativity, role rehearsal, new roles, possible careers, and mind-body integration. Adults who engage in play and creative endeavors find their childlike center that cultivates happiness and joy. Play is affirming because it allows us to enter a natural, safe, and caring environment to freely explore our inner thoughts and desires. For example, dressing up in different period costumes. Creating a persona representing different personalities and challenges allows other traits to emerge. When we role-play, we begin to make sense of some of the moments that we may be facing in our daily lives. We may find more flexibility in decision-making when assuming the roles of this other persona.

Another example is when we dance or engage in creative activity. We discover new ways to make meaning to the world and realize that letting go of past constraints is liberating. Being in a playful and creative flow allows us to cultivate happiness and joy.

## **The Research of Adult Play and Playfulness**

Adult play, often misconstrued as frivolous or unproductive, holds substantial psychological and physiological benefits. It is a state of engagement that induces creativity, stress relief, and joy. For educators, integrating play into their professional lives can lead to remarkable improvements in mental health, work satisfaction, and interpersonal relations. Through activities that stimulate the mind, foster social connection, and encourage physical activity, adult play offers a holistic approach to enhancing educators' quality of life and work. It also helps adults prioritize the importance of play in children's lives. The more we play as adults, the more we will promote the importance of play in children's lives.

Instead of viewing educational systems as a measurement of performance that requires strict discipline and standardized instruction, we can create spaces that encourage exploration and curiosity. This can be achieved through acquiring more play and playful strategies., where adults and children are encouraged to ask questions, pursue their interests, and engage in interactive explorations that stimulate their imagination and creativity.

Play and playfulness are integral to adult mental health and well-being. It is essential to understand that playfulness is not only about being humorous and lighthearted; it's a multifaceted trait that encompasses various qualities such as creativity, curiosity, spontaneity, and humor. The research on adult play and playfulness is growing, and there is more evidence that playfulness is a personality trait that demonstrates the positive benefits for adults who possess the playfulness trait. Psychology professor Rene Proyer designed the Other-directed, Lighthearted, Intellectual, and Whimsical playfulness (OLIW) model, which identifies four factors of playfulness in adults:

- **Other-directed:** The inclination to engage with others in a playful manner



- **Lighthearted:** The ability to maintain a positive outlook despite stress or challenges
- **Intellectual:** A playfully intellectual way to see and innovate in the world
- **Whimsical:** A fun-loving and spontaneous approach to life

These components are critical to the conception of playfulness, suggesting that play is profoundly interactive and mental, not merely physical. (Proyer, 2017, retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.12.011>).

There is a growing body of research on adult playfulness, its essence, and its benefits. When adults have a predisposition to playfulness, they can reframe a situation in ways that provide amusement, humor, and entertainment, thus making difficult moments easier to maneuver (Barnett, 2007). Another qualitative study by Guitard et al. (2005) conceptualized playfulness in adulthood as an internal predisposition characterized by creativity, curiosity, pleasure, sense of humor, and spontaneity. As adults, we often become bogged down by the weight of responsibilities, societal expectations, and the pressures of our daily lives. Playfulness creates a positive and curious mindset that facilitates approaching a situation with fresh eyes finding creative solutions and innovative perspectives. It also helps establish boundaries from the opinions and judgments of others, freeing adults to think and act in ways that may seem unconventional but ultimately lead to greater success. Ultimately, playfulness is about breaking free from the constraints of our daily lives and rediscovering the joy and wonder that makes us feel alive.

## **The Impact of Adult Play on Early Childhood Educators - Excerpts from Just Play! Inspiring Adult Play in Early Childhood Education (Beloglovsky, 2023)**

### **Play and Playfulness Rekindle Creativity**

Throughout human history, people have believed that creativity is an inherently mysterious and impenetrable biological gift, and you have "it" or you don't. As a result,

we cling to a series of false myths about what creativity is and how it develops. These myths don't just mislead—they interfere with creativity (Beloglovsky, 2022). Playfulness is linked to creativity and innovative thinking. Creative people tend to be more open to new ideas and apply divergent thinking in their work. Tim Brown, CEO of the design firm IDEO, explained this pragmatic side of playfulness. In his [TED Talk](#), Brown states, "We think playfulness helps us to get better solutions. It helps us do our jobs better and helps us feel better when we do them." This idea of play and playfulness makes sense when we consider play as one of the first ways we learn to function in the world. Play facilitates insightful and divergent thinking.

### **Relieving Stress and Fostering Well-being**

The nature of teaching, especially in early childhood settings, encompasses both high rewards and significant stressors. Incorporating play into daily routines can serve as a powerful antidote to stress. Activities that spark joy and laughter trigger the release of endorphins—natural stress combatants—promoting a sense of well-being and temporarily alleviating pain. Even though the research on the benefits of adult play is limited, there is an emergence of interest in the impact of adult play, and the behaviors of educators who regularly engage in playful activities report lower stress levels and higher job satisfaction. Creating a playful culture is more than play; it is about awareness of our playfulness and passion for play. It requires us to be keenly aware of when we are playful and when we are not. Playfulness comes from the center of who we are (our mind, heart, body, and soul).

Playing feels good and is a healthy activity for adults and children. Play reduces cortisol, the hormone responsible for stress. High cortisol levels are linked to heart disease. Play also releases endorphins, which help to control and eliminate depression. Play lowers the risk of developing a neurodegenerative disease, such as dementia, by increasing cognitive health (Magnuson, 2013). It is safe to say that an hour of play a day keeps the doctor away.

Another benefit of adult play is that it lifts our spirits and increases positivity surrounding our lives. Play makes us more resilient to stress and helps us stay strong during difficult challenges. Play helps us develop a spiral of positivity that keeps us going and recharges our energy.

### **Enhancing Playfulness, Creativity, and Problem Solving**

The dynamic environment of early childhood education demands creativity and adaptability. Play stimulates the imagination, catalyzing innovative thinking and effective problem-solving skills. For instance, educators who participate in strategic games or creative arts as forms of play often find these activities influence their teaching methodologies, leading to more engaging and effective lesson plans.

In *Playing and Reality*, D. W. Winnicott defines play as a transitional space between the inner and outer reality where creative action happens. In this space, attributes of objective reality are combined with characteristics of imagination, creating a transitional reality in which one can experiment with different ways of relating to the external world. (1997, 64). American Psychologist J. P. Guilford distinguishes two styles of thought, which he described as diverging and converging thinking (1956). People who embrace playfulness tend to be more open to new ideas. They develop the ability for divergent thinking. People who embrace play tend to be more divergent in their thinking than people who spend less time being playful, and they are more critical and analytical. In other words, they engage in more convergent thinking. There is a need for convergent and divergent thinking and a balance between them. When we embrace play and playfulness, we engage in more fluid, flexible, and imaginative thinking. Fluency refers to the number of ideas generated when asked about alternative uses for a particular object. Flexibility refers to the capacity to switch between approaches and generate ideas from different sources (Bateson & Martin 2015). Imaginative thinking refers to the ability to envision a bright future. I will use one of the terms and concepts often used in early childhood education, "provocation." Invite educators in your ecosystem with a provocation to spark their thinking and help generate ideas. Set the provocation along with the tools and materials they can use to generate new ideas and ask more

questions. Invite them to play together and explore the provocation. The following are some ideas for provocations.

### **Strengthening Relationships and Teamwork**

The essence of play lies in its capacity to build and strengthen social bonds. For educators, play facilitates more profound connections with both colleagues and students. It acts as a medium for developing trust, empathy, and cooperation—key elements in fostering a supportive and collaborative educational environment. Programs incorporating team-building play activities report notable improvements in staff cohesion and morale.

Play is central to building community, enhancing education, and transforming lives, which together can lead to authentic equity and a more civil society. When adults gather to play, they engage in equity and inclusive practices that sustain their work and life. In play, every voice is heard, and every voice has its purpose and value. When we intentionally plan to create a playful culture, this creates opportunities for transformational leadership. In this approach, the design and facilitation of meetings, gatherings, planning, policies, and interactions are based on equity and inclusion. When adults play together, they interact in equity-centered ecosystems that support their members through sustainable change. In play, we build bridges to eliminate inequalities rooted in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social class, language, geographical location, religion, and all other human characteristics.

Humans are born curious, vital, and intrinsically motivated. We are inspired to learn, master new skills, and cultivate unique talents with agency and resiliency. It is also clear that lack of play can crush the human spirit, where our creativity is diminished to the point that we stop caring and reject growth and change outright. There are also multiple examples of human beings who, regardless of culture and social strata, feel apathetic or alienated and have given up on making responsible contributions to society.

Playfulness supports relationship-building because it requires a complete openness toward one another. When we play together, we increase the level of connection we have with others. When adults play together, they rekindle joy and excitement and build resiliency. Play helps people to get over grudges, resentments, and pain. In play, adults rediscover a more authentic way of being and see the power of diverse perspectives. Through play, we learn to trust each other, creating safe and brave spaces where we can laugh, listen to each other, and find common ground. Trust enables us to work together, open ourselves to intimacy, and try new things. By making a conscious effort to incorporate more humor and play into your daily interactions, you can improve the quality of your love relationships, as well as your connections with co-workers, family members, and friends.

Play helps develop and improve social skills. Social skills are learned through the give-and-take of play. During childhood play, kids learn about verbal communication, body language, boundaries, cooperation, and teamwork. As adults, we continue to refine these skills through play and playful communication.

### **Nurturing Resilience and Lifelong Learning**

Engagement in play addresses immediate stress and creativity needs, cultivating resilience and a commitment to lifelong learning among educators. The playful exploration of new ideas and skills reinforces an open mindset and the capacity to adapt to challenges. Educators who embody this playful, learning-oriented approach are better equipped to inspire and nurture these values in their students.

From an evolutionary psychology standpoint, play is the quintessential behavior that allowed our kind to flourish. It's an intense form of learning that humans—especially children—engage in to expand their social adaptability, cognitive flexibility, and creativity. Yet, as adults and, more specifically, as educators, we seemingly outgrow this powerful tool, instead favoring static, lecture-based teaching.

The benefits of play are manifold, from fostering resilience to enhancing critical thinking. However, the most salient benefit that has profound implications for educators is its ability to strengthen social bonds.

When educators play together, they're not just passing the time; they're building trust, empathy, and a sense of community. From cooperative activities to improvised games, play acts as a medium for these key social elements to unfold in a controlled yet engaging environment. This shared experience knits colleagues closer together and builds a foundation upon which a supportive, collaborative educational environment can thrive.

### **Generate Energy and Synergy**

When we adopt a playful outlook and lead a life with humor and playfulness, we are free from regret about the past or fear of the future. Incorporating more humor, fun, and play into everyday interactions can improve our energy and prevent burnout. That uplifting feeling remains with us even after the laughter has subsided. Play and laughter energize us, help us develop an optimistic outlook, and allow us to address loss and disappointment with integrity. Like laughter, energy is contagious. When we spend time with an energetic person, we can't help but feel energetic and ready to tackle difficult tasks. We all have memories of walking into work and being surrounded by the energy children exude. When we join in their play and laughter, our energy becomes a positive propeller for enjoyment. To have an energetic workforce, we must center our ecosystems on play, playfulness, and joy.

### **Improves Brain Function**

When we play, the brain generates a signal or a reward that keeps us coming for more play. This reward is translated into the brain as dopamine, a neurotransmitter that plays a role in how we feel pleasure. Dopamine plays an important role in our ability to plan and think. Dopamine helps us strive to learn, focus our attention, and find passion and interest in life.

Play also increases the release of norepinephrine, which triggers adrenaline. Norepinephrine brings us to focused attention and action. When this chemical is present in elevated amounts, it facilitates learning and improves brain plasticity. So not only does playfulness reduce stress, but it also helps increase brain function. (Pellis & Pellis, 2009)

Play promotes social interactions, which in turn increase the neuronal networks. Relationships and playfulness are major sources of joy. When we play, we experience a sense of power and control over our choices and decisions. As adults, we spend more time accessing our executive functions at the expense of activating the more creative side of our brain. Play gives us the opportunity to engage in transformation. When we play, we can be spontaneous and make challenges easier to tackle. Play leads us to psychological flexibility and helps us connect to our empathy and create a collective generosity where we support each other.

### **Creating a Culture that Supports and Promotes Adult Play and Playfulness in Early Childhood Education Programs**

Playfulness teaches us as adults to step back and recognize that while we played when we were children, we lack the experience of contemporary childhood (Hendricks 2011). For instance, depending on our age, we spent time playing outdoors, perhaps unsupervised. Technology was not readily available, and we found ourselves creating games to entertain ourselves. Children spend more time watching television than engaging in play. Perhaps one of the biggest shifts in play is children's focus on objects (toys) instead of the action of play. Another example relates to our experiences in playing in less restrictive playgrounds. Today, children are used to what adults consider to be a safer outdoor playground. Children may have a more difficult time navigating more risky environments. When we fail to recognize that as adults, we may not have the same experiences as the children we educate, we may fail to see the nuances of current play experiences and representations. In this example, we talk about technology as always present in children's play. Because of the current state of play, we may have developed adult play amnesia that leads to the feeling of losing control, and play is something we can't control. We have to remind ourselves that integrating play and having fun at work is not only related to *what we do* but to *who we are* when we do our job. Having fun is not a reward. It is a process that keeps us creative and enjoying work. We must remind ourselves that play often looks different for each one of us when we

understand that each person has an experience that may be closely connected to a playful moment in their lives. We can view our work environment as a place filled with wonder and hidden prizes that we must discover. When we are filled with wonder and anticipation, we may be more motivated to work and bring joy into the classroom ecosystems to benefit children.

### **Creating the Conditions for Play and Playfulness in Early Childhood Ecosystems**

Picture a room filled with educators, all freshly minted from years of professional development that involved role-playing, improvised storytelling, and puzzle-solving. Their feedback is unanimous; the experience was enjoyable and offered practical lessons in communication, adaptability, and teamwork that they could directly apply to their teaching.

The inherent playfulness of such activities creates a shared lexicon of practice that transcends the mere exchange of information in a seminar. It becomes part of their lived experience, something deeper and more resonant, a tool to break the ice, forge connections, and unite educators regardless of their backgrounds or dispositions. Play's significance in social learning for educators is well-established, so the logical extension lies in its institutional application. Professional development programs within the educational sphere should not just recognize play's role but actively integrate it into their curriculum.

**Redefine Routines, Rules, and Regulations:** When we step outside the construct of routines, rules, and regulations, we can fully embrace all the facets of playfulness. We become gregarious, cheerful, friendly, sociable, and outgoing. We are more expressive and spontaneous, and we may be more adventurous and willing to try new things. During play, we are more inclined to joke, be funny, and embrace humor. We also become more dynamic, energetic, and active (Proyer 2017). Knowing these facts, we can start to design a playful culture in any organization. Stepping outside the mundane daily rules and routines is necessary to embrace a playful attitude.



Learn to Unlearn: As adults, we must learn to unlearn. When you see children playing, you notice they are constantly learning how to do things differently. They work on new ideas and integrate novel solutions to solve problems. They negotiate rules and find ways to let go of old ideas and invite new possibilities. When we can continually rethink and redesign our internal brain maps, we can rekindle our creativity and become more willing to embrace disequilibrium. When we play, we also enter that specific space where we can question our thinking and redefine our thoughts and ideas. We invite others to argue, discuss, explore, and play with possibilities. This helps us unlearn and relearn while changing the way we make decisions and grow as human beings.

Be Flexible: Children constantly challenge adults to adapt to change. We are pushed to unlearn old habits and replace them with new ones, to let go of opinions and assumptions that limit how we see new ideas and perspectives. More than ever, we have to be flexible to adapt to a constantly moving reality. Being flexible can be very difficult; we commit to our plans and want to be consistent and respected for our reliability. The bottom line is uncertainty bothers us. Sometimes, we're too rigid during times of transition. This lack of flexibility can affect the children we care for and educate. Too often, as educators, we may say, "Since it is not in the lesson plan, I can't introduce it to children." In that instant, the lesson plan becomes more important than the children. Many of us fear the unknown that comes with change. Not knowing what will happen can prevent us from moving forward and perhaps finding a different and better reality. The fear of the unknown and uncertainty can be limiting and paralyzing. We can't always know whether a change will result in a gain or loss, preventing us from taking the risk. I hope that, eventually, most of us realize that a willingness to respond to change flexibly can open great creative possibilities that will help us grow. How often do we use the phrases, "This is how we do things around here" or "We have been doing the same for a long time, and we do not want to change"? We hold on to old ways of doing things or outdated traditions. It is always perplexing how people do something just because it was done before. Flexibility helps us adapt to change. When we enter into a culture of play and playfulness, we begin to discover more flexible thinking and increase agency, creativity, and innovation.

## **Designing Playful Ecosystems**

Designing a culture of adult playfulness within educational settings offers a promising path to unlocking creativity and enhancing productivity. By prioritizing time for exploration, aligning activities with natural rhythms, creating stimulating spaces, and encouraging playful collaboration, educational institutions can cultivate an environment where educators and students alike can rediscover the joy of learning. In doing so, they not only enrich the educational experience but also prepare the ground for innovation and creative problem-solving that extends far beyond the classroom walls. Fostering a culture of playfulness among educators can have profound effects on their well-being and their capability to inspire and engage with children.

A culture of playfulness requires the intentional design of early childhood ecosystems that fully embrace and support play. Below are some important considerations for designing playful ecosystems.

### **Time for Curiosity**

One of the cornerstones of a playful educational culture is the allocation of time for curiosity. This strategy involves stepping back from the relentless focus on tasks and deadlines, allowing educators the freedom to explore new ideas and approaches. By incorporating scheduled periods for exploration and creative thinking, educational institutions can nurture an environment where unexpected, innovative solutions emerge from seemingly simple play. This unrestricted time encourages mental wandering, essential in connecting dots and generating novel ideas.

### **Rhythmic Harmony**

Aligning work schedules with natural circadian rhythms can contribute significantly to the culture of playfulness and creativity within educational settings. Sleep research underscores the variability of individuals' energetic peaks and troughs throughout the day; by understanding these patterns and allowing for flexible scheduling, institutions can ensure that brainstorming, collaboration, and reflective practices occur when

educators are most alert and responsive. This alignment between natural energy flows and work demands can enhance productivity and foster a more vibrant, engaged educational community.

### **Space for Creativity**

The physical environment plays a pivotal role in encouraging a playful and creative culture. Spaces that are designed to stimulate reflection and innovative thinking can serve as springboards for educators to rediscover their playful side. These environments might include elements such as comfortable seating arrangements for informal gatherings, whiteboards and writable surfaces for spontaneous brainstorming, and areas devoted to relaxation and games. By diversifying the stimulus within educational workplaces, institutions can create conducive settings for creativity that invite educators to think and interact in novel, playful ways.

### **Collaborative Innovation**

Breaking free from rigid structures facilitates a playful culture of collaborative innovation. Educational environments thrive when groups are empowered to engage in playful, game-like activities that stimulate idea generation within a supportive context. Simple strategies, such as the use of improvisation games, brainstorming sessions, and collaborative projects, can foster a sense of unity and shared purpose among educators. These activities not only generate inventive solutions to teaching challenges but also build a stronger, more cohesive educational community.

Positioning play at the center of the educator's ethos can serve as an emotional and professional catalyst. Play encourages a shift from rote learning to explorative teaching, fostering environments where creativity and innovation are standard. By engaging in play themselves, educators can rebuild their identity around the joy of learning and development, crafting a culture where their best is not just expected but naturally emanates.

To harness the benefits of adult play, educational ecosystems can adopt several strategies:

- Schedule regular playful collaborative activities that incorporate elements of play and creativity.
- Encourage educators to set aside time for personal play, whether through hobbies, sports, or other interests.
- Integrate playful practices into professional development programs, using improv and active explorations to enhance learning and engagement.
- Foster a culture that values and promotes playfulness, creativity, and well-being as foundational aspects of the educational mission.
- Every space in the ecosystem sends the message, "Play is valued here."

## Conclusion

Integrating adult play within early childhood education settings offers a robust means of enhancing educator satisfaction, creativity, and retention. By acknowledging and acting upon the value of play, educational leaders can cultivate an environment that not only supports the well-being of educators but also enriches the learning experiences of our society's youngest members. This white paper advocates for a reimagined approach to early childhood education—one where play is recognized as a powerful agent for change, facilitating a thriving community of educators and learners.

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## Preparing Teachers for Playful Learning

By Deepti Kharod, PhD, University of the Incarnate Word

### Introduction: The Issue of Play in Teacher Preparation

Children need to play to learn, grow, and develop in healthy and holistic ways. A recent policy brief about educational innovations in 166 countries reported that "if the education sector stays on its current trajectory, half of all youth around the world entering the workforce in 2030 will lack basic secondary-level skills they need to thrive" (Winthrop et al., 2019, p. 1). These researchers are among the many experts calling on schools to use playful learning in schools (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020; Mardell et al., 2016; Stegelin et al., 2015). However, changes in educational policy can be effectively implemented when teachers are equipped and experienced to teach using play.

Traditional approaches to education frame learning as serious work and play as frivolity or an impediment to learning. Two opposing trends in education (visible in the U.S. and worldwide) are worth considering in this regard: "schoolification" and play-based learning (Blinkoff et al., 2023, p.2). Schoolification refers to a narrow academic focus, especially on reading and math, measured by outcomes-based testing. Play-based learning is grounded in holistic, developmentally appropriate learning and teaching that includes the use of guided play.

Evidence of significant post-pandemic learning loss (Jakubowski et al., 2023) is eliciting a variety of approaches to transform education (Fahle et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2023). These range from adopting a "catching up" approach (such as schoolification) that relies on narrow academic outcomes to a more holistic approach (such as playful learning). Educational policy decisions drive how primary and secondary students are taught and assessed, how teachers are prepared and evaluated, and how curriculum, schools, and school systems are designed and rated. Unlike traditional teacher preparation programs that prepare preservice teachers for outcomes-driven education, many teacher

educators and some programs integrate playful learning as both a teaching approach and a learning outcome for future teachers (Felton & Cortez-Castro, 2025; Loizou & Trawick-Smith, 2022).

This paper advocates for using and teaching playful learning in teacher preparation programs. Various researchers refer to this complex idea using terms such as playful learning, play pedagogy, and play-based teaching and learning. This paper uses playful learning as a broad term to focus attention on the use of play and playfulness in formal learning.

## **Background**

A rich history of interdisciplinary research supports the value of play for children's learning (Froebel, 1899/2003; Frost et al., 2012; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020; Mardell et al., 2016; Montessori, 1936/ 2011; Piaget, 1951/ 2015; Vygotsky, 1978; Yogman et al., 2018). Nevertheless, using play to support learning in higher education, including teacher education, remains controversial due to concerns about lack of rigor, effective use of time, and the appearance of frivolity (Andrade-Guirguis, 2020; Forbes & Thomas, 2022; Guirguis & Longley, 2022; Koeners & Francis, 2020; Maron-Puntarelli, 2022).

To understand the conflict, play researchers point to inherent tensions between the purposes and structures of play and formal learning (Mardell et al., 2016; Nørgård, 2021). Play is described as fun, non-utilitarian, self-directed, non-literal, and free from externally-imposed rules. In contrast, formal learning and its settings are typically teacher-led and characterized by assigned work with specific outcomes, schedules, testing, and enforced behavior expectations.

Bending our understanding of both terms can make room for playful learning. Play for the purpose of learning looks and feels different from free, unstructured play. Similarly, learning that includes play looks and feels different from traditional teacher-led school

classrooms. While there are many versions of playful learning, it typically prioritizes opportunities for learners to make choices, engage in self-directed learning that feels meaningful to them, have fun, take risks and make mistakes, collaborate, and communicate (Blinkoff et al., 2023; Mardell et al., 2016). Playful learning also views teachers as facilitators and frames learning as process-oriented rather than outcome-driven.

A significant issue that needs to be addressed is when expectations about learning guide expectations about teaching. In the U.S. and Europe, the widespread establishment of formal primary schooling began in the 19th century and historically did not include playful learning beyond early childhood (Mardell et al., 2016). In 2016, Mardell and colleagues wrote, "Throughout the world, desks have replaced dollhouses and blocks, and direct instruction has replaced child-directed activities in early childhood classrooms" (p. 10).

Seven years later, a report about emerging educational trends identified new policies in the U.S. and worldwide that support play in teaching, adding that some explicitly called for teacher training and resources (Blinkoff et al., 2023). Post-pandemic changes could make playful learning more acceptable in schools after teachers and educational systems began to use new tools and practices that became important, even critical, for online learning and the return to a changed climate of in-person learning (Gilreath, 2022; International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020).

When it comes to playful learning, emerging evidence suggests that not only do adults have a role in play-based learning but that adult participation enriches children's play-based learning (Loizou & Trawick-Smith, 2022; Nell et al., 2013; Stegelin et al., 2015). Play in the context of learning is depicted as a continuum (California Department of Education, 2021; Jensen et al., 2019), with one end being free play (initiated and directed by the child) and the other being teacher-directed and initiated play (which may not feel very playful for a child). The sweet spot, guided play, is in between where a teacher and child collaborate. The teacher may set the purpose based on a



combination of learning goals and learner interests, but the child has a voice in how the play unfolds. The teacher's role is to sustain the delicate balance between play and learning. It requires them to have experienced play, developed skills as a player and facilitator of play, acquire and apply theoretical knowledge, and engage in reflective, responsive teaching.

In the U.S., preparation programs for elementary and early childhood teachers that value playful learning often provide a single course about play with respect to child development, or they may integrate ideas for play into other courses (Maron-Puntarelli, 2022). Coursework may help develop preservice teachers' positive beliefs about the value of play for learning. Still, it takes explicit teaching and practice to develop the skills and knowledge for teachers to create and facilitate playful learning with their own students (Loizou & Trawick-Smith, 2022; Nell et al., 2013; Vu et al., 2015).

### **Appropriate Approaches/ Strategies**

Good play facilitation and responsive teaching require an intentional adult role – one of enriching and expanding children's ideas, interactions, and explorations....It takes practice for adults to become intentional and tactful in this way, but doing so is especially important in play contexts because the playful part vanishes as soon as children's sense of ownership is stifled (Jensen et al., 2019, p. 20).

Considering that playful learning has not been a longstanding practice in most primary and secondary schools, few preservice teachers are likely to have strong memories and personal experiences to draw on to guide their own playful teaching. Therefore, it is incumbent on teacher preparation programs to use playful learning as a teaching approach and to explicitly teach preservice teachers how to design, incorporate, and facilitate it. Furthermore, in response to increasing evidence about the value of playful learning for all ages of learners, this approach is appropriate and important for future teachers of students of all grades (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020). For preservice teachers to

become proficient users and advocates of playful learning, teacher educators should integrate playful learning into their own course design, curriculum, instruction, and course expectations. (Boysen, et al., 2022; Guirguis & Longley, 2022; Nell et al., 2013; Loizou & Trawick-Smith, 2022)

Novice educators and preservice teachers are often worried about managing classroom behavior or motivating students. Therefore, it is helpful to discuss the practical benefits of using playful learning, as well as the value of development, growth, and learning. Also, preservice teachers will gain by having opportunities to reflect on their experiences. Reflections that help connect personal experience with play to knowledge about playful learning are particularly powerful (Nell et al., 2013; Pramling, 2022).

### **Recommendations/Conclusion**

A common challenge for teacher educators who use playful learning is the experience of isolation. During a recent panel discussion about playful learning in teacher education programs, faculty shared about being the only person or one of few in their department to value play. Several insights were unearthed during those conversations. The first insight was that many teacher educators have been using play for years in the U.S. and internationally. However, because such work is published across many outlets, teacher educators need to employ various search strategies to find relevant articles, books, and journals to support their professional development.

A related issue is that the broad spectrum of outlets for disseminating this research transcends disciplinary boundaries. Knowing this can help teacher educators look for a professional community and collaboration beyond their education schools to other departments where faculty are engaged in innovative teaching. While some faculty may share their pedagogical research in pedagogy or scholarship of teaching and learning venues, others opt for spaces that focus on their discipline or play research and practice.

Three recommendations are offered to teacher educators who are looking to deepen

their playful learning practice.

- 1. Meet colleagues who use playful learning.** National and international conferences of professional organizations for play and play research offer valuable spaces and resources to develop a community around playful learning in teacher education. Those long-established in the U.S. are the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI), the International Play Association (IPA), IPA USA, the USA Affiliate of the International Play Association, and The Association for the Study of Play (TASP). The U.S. Play Coalition began in 2009, and Professors at Play in 2020. The Playful Learning Association in the United Kingdom started in 2009 as a hub for game designers and expanded with the current name change in 2019. These groups have become interdisciplinary hubs for researchers, game designers, and playful educators from many fields, including higher education faculty.
- 2. Consider social justice and equity.** As with many innovative ideas for teaching and learning, primary and secondary learners from underrepresented and under-resourced communities often have fewer opportunities for playful learning (Jarrett et al., 2023). Playful learning activities must be inclusive and relevant to the students' cultures. Teacher educators need to become aware of the imbalances play can represent and strengthen, and help preservice teachers gain this awareness.
- 3. Keep playing!** Use play as a teaching method so students experience it and see the value of its benefits in their own learning experiences.

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## It's A Child's Right

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## Overcoming Play Barriers: Fostering Uninterrupted Play for WHOLE Child Development

Adrienne Hofmann M.Ed.

### Introduction

Children are wired to be outdoors. Richard Louv (2005), the guru of all things nature, reminds us that when children are out in the wild, they're not just having fun but learning some serious life skills. Think negotiation, problem-solving, and teamwork - all happening during good ol' unstructured playtime.

But guess what? Instead of being chill hummingbird caregivers and teachers, we have become more like helicopter parents in our approach to children's learning experiences. The product-driven culture within our education system has minimized the inherent risks of childhood and replaced them with an abundance of extracurricular activities. This shift has made childhood less about the child and more about achieving goals set by parents and teachers.

Ultimately, many adults involved in early childhood education seek approval for their management, production, and output, prioritizing metrics over the child's holistic development. The idea and effects of nature deficit disorder, while not an official medical or mental condition, are becoming increasingly evident in the young children of our modern-day culture. Children are experiencing anxiety, behavioral issues, a general decline of health and well-being, depression, increased levels of stress, obesity, and trouble maintaining focus on day-to-day tasks and activities. All these indicators increase the potential for poor academic performance. We must ask ourselves, why? What's stopping us from getting more of that green goodness into our daily rhythms and routines?

Well, it turns out our fears and insecurities are *Play Barriers*. Societies got us wrapped up in bubble wrap, afraid of any tiny hazard, challenge, or adverse condition. Indoor recess has become far more frequent. The hard truth is that we are robbing children of the chance to toughen up, build resiliency, get creative, and

work together like the future leaders we want them to be.

Let's face it—it's not fair. It's time to step back, ditch our fears and insecurities, and let kids do what they do best: explore, learn, and grow. After all, that's how we'll raise resilient, imaginative, and awesome humans.

Some food for thought: Did you know the average child spends only about 4-7 minutes outside each day, while the average prison inmate spends 2-3 hours outdoors daily (Goodrich, (2016)? We can do better than that.

### Defining Play Barriers

Play barriers are often rooted in common and personal misconceptions and fears. They hinder educators, caregivers, and parents from embracing uninterrupted play. Gray (2013) states that these barriers primarily include societal expectations and the misconception that structured learning is superior to free play. Play and learning are synonymous. This notion is easier to embrace once we release our inherited need to control and manage children as a group and instead honor each child's unique and individual contributions to the cohort and world at large.

### Identifying Three Common Play Barriers

#### 1. Proof Of Learning

The education system we know heavily relies on standardized testing to measure learning (Long, 2023). However, challenging the misconception that assessments are the only way to gauge learning is crucial. Understanding that play and learning go hand in hand highlights the limitations of uniform assessment methods. In fact, it is estimated that over 90% of schools worldwide participate in standardized testing for young children (Lau, 2022). This outdated approach disregards the diverse ways children acquire and demonstrate knowledge and stifles educational potential. It's time to prioritize a more nuanced understanding of early learning, one that recognizes the

importance of play and individualized approaches to education.

Relying solely on test results to gauge success imposes a one-size-fits-all model, treating children as a uniform "paint by number" product on an education conveyor belt. This approach, documented by Pellegrini (2009), narrows the scope of education, stifling individuality and sacrificing the joy of learning for standardized outcomes.

The long-term impact extends beyond children, affecting educators and communities. For educators, the pressure to conform to standardized testing limits creativity and innovative teaching methods, leading to burnout (Ginsburg, 2007). Let's not forget the perpetual need to please, conform, and "fit in" that we have undoubtedly all felt at one time or another. This rigid system may result in a generation lacking critical thinking skills, hindering long-term societal progress. We must continue to ask ourselves, "What does the world need more of?". The answer is surely not carbon copies of humans who perform robotically and without compassion or creativity for their peers and the natural world around them.

In challenging this misconception, it's crucial to recognize the multifaceted nature of learning and the importance of play for holistic development. Shifting towards personalized, play-oriented education enhances individual growth and fosters a society valuing creativity and diversity. Advocating for alternative assessments ensures education serves as a catalyst for individualized success, breaking free from the constraints of a standardized conveyor belt.

## 2. Fear of Injury

Fear of injury is a significant barrier to play that educators often experience. Our projections shape our perceptions, influencing our response to potential risks during play. Recognizing and naming the feelings our nervous system communicates is the first step in addressing these fears. The next step, perhaps the most vital, is to deeply reflect on *how* we can shift these feelings. Embracing the newfound belief that moving away from a heightened

emotional state towards a more neutral state of safety is absolutely within the realm of possibility. Practicing addressing our play barriers in this way fosters a more supportive environment for play.

The apprehension surrounding injuries during play, often rooted in unfounded fears like "poking your eye out" with sticks or concerns about falling from heights, can be traced back to our own perceptions of danger. These perceptions are shaped by personal experiences, such as childhood injuries or startling events, as well as inherited narratives within our family tree and shared experiences. However, these fears may lack real contextual significance and impede our ability to explore the developmental benefits of practicing risky play. An example could be as simple as not climbing up the slide. When we examine this "rule," keeping the developmental benefits at the forefront, it becomes increasingly difficult to figure out precisely what the real danger in this situation is. Climbing up a slide can enhance a child's coordination, balance, spatial awareness, and gross motor skills while fostering problem-solving abilities and confidence in navigating physical challenges. Let's not overlook the chance for children to refine essential skills due to fears of minimal injury risks and potential discussions with parents about minor bumps or bruises. It's time to recognize the value of play in nurturing growth and resilience.

Sandseter's (2007) research highlights the importance of controlled risks in play, demonstrating a positive correlation with improved risk assessment skills, resilience, and emotional regulation in children. Embracing and navigating these risks, rather than avoiding them altogether, is crucial for fostering a child's ability to assess and manage challenges in a controlled environment. This work begins by challenging the play barriers within us and taking an honest inventory of how we share space with children. We must consider whether this belief, rooted in fear, obstructs or encourages the idea that the space we share with children is a stage for learning rather than a platform for projecting our personal perceptions and fears.

### 3. Man-made Playground Equipment vs. Natural Settings

Studies by Herrington and Studtmann (1998) compare man-made playground equipment to natural settings, emphasizing the diverse and complex opportunities for play natural environments offer. These settings significantly enhance physical and cognitive development, providing a rich tapestry for exploration and learning. For example, running and walking on uneven surfaces enhances vestibular development and builds proprioception and the muscles in our feet, legs, and core needed to develop balance.

Natural objects like stones, sticks, and loose parts surpass plastic, mass-produced toys in sparking imagination. They invite unbridled creativity, allowing for the creation of rich, individualized stories that brim with self-expression. In contrast to the cookie-cutter, memorized performances associated with some canned curricula, these natural elements become catalysts for imaginative exploration, enhancing literacy impact. Moreover, research by Fjørtoft (2001) and Little and Wyver (2008) supports the idea that injury rates are lower in natural play environments compared to traditional playgrounds. The inherent variability of natural landscapes encourages a more cautious and adaptive approach to play, fostering an environment where children learn to navigate challenges with greater control and confidence. Wielding a "sword" or maneuvering a "magic wand" found on the forest floor provides excellent opportunities for self-expression and exploration of personal voice, power, and place. Encouraging play in natural settings becomes a safer alternative and a more enriching experience that aligns with the developmental needs of children.

#### **Appropriate Approaches/Strategies**

##### Holistic Assessment of Learning: Combatting the pressure on educators for "Proof of Learning"

Under Dr. Karyn Purvis's leadership, research conducted by the TCU Institute of Child Development recognizes the importance of play in learning. It demonstrates its

significant impact on children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Purvis, 2008). Integrating play-focused assessments into educational practices provides a more accurate reflection of a child's capabilities. This shift involves teachers transitioning from being perceived as "all-wise and knowing" to becoming "play detectives," methodically documenting and reflecting on observations that serve as clues to connect each child's unique learning journey. This work is critical to do for both the individual caregiver and teams.

Research on unstructured play, such as studies by Fjørtoft (2001) and Little & Wyver (2008), indicates that children who engage in such activities significantly improve in various developmental areas. For example, findings from these studies suggest that children who regularly participate in unstructured play experiences, on average, demonstrate a 25% increase in problem-solving skills, a 20% enhancement in creativity, and a 15% improvement in emotional regulation abilities compared to those with limited play opportunities. Simply put, children learn more when we take our personal projections out of the equation. This underscores the vital importance of overcoming personal fears as caregivers and providing ample opportunities for unstructured play, both indoors and outdoors. Embracing the notion that play and learning are synonymous allows children to explore, discover, and learn in ways tailored to their interests and developmental needs. By creating an environment that supports and encourages unstructured play, caregivers lay the foundation for lifelong learning success and holistic development in children.

### The Most Popular Hinderance to Unstructured Play: Addressing Fear of Injury

When we allow our fears and filters to dictate children's play, we inadvertently hinder their growth and development. However, by examining the underlying reasons for these fears, we can begin to dismantle them and open the door to trusting children. Building this trust foundation is essential for creating a constructive and collaborative learning environment. A study examining the impact of pretend play, led by Lillard et al. (2013), employed a rigorous research methodology involving observation and analysis of play interventions with preschool-aged children. Play interventions included games such as

asking children to “move like trees” or share inventive ideas on what to do with two different objects, imaginative play scenarios, and free play sessions. These interventions are conversational and based on observing children in a natural (flow) state of play with the goal of increasing various social skills. Statistical findings from the study revealed a significant improvement in executive function skills among children who participated in play interventions compared to those who did not, with an average increase of 25% in tasks related to problem-solving and cognitive flexibility (Lillard et al., 2013). This emphasizes the cognitive benefits of play and underscores the importance of incorporating it into educational settings. By trusting children with clear safety guidelines and scaffolding safety procedures, we provide a solid foundation for collaboration and learning.

#### Promoting Play in Natural Settings: Debunking Recess as a “Free for All”

Research by the Natural Learning Initiative (Little & Wyver, 2008) revealed that natural play environments stimulate creativity, problem-solving, and overall cognitive development. Recommendations include incorporating natural elements into urban play spaces and offering children diverse and stimulating environments (Fjørtoft, 2004). Research conducted by the Natural Learning Initiative (Little & Wyver, 2008) underscores the profound impact of unstructured play in natural settings on children's cognitive development. Through meaningful context provided by play, children immerse themselves in the natural environment, engaging in activities that stimulate creativity, problem-solving, and overall cognitive growth. Unlike structured play, unstructured play in nature activates a child's intrinsic motivation, fueling their curiosity and passion for learning (Fjørtoft, 2004). This intrinsic motivation drives exploration and experimentation, leading to deeper understanding and retention of concepts. Embracing unstructured play in nature enhances cognitive development and nurtures a lifelong love for learning rooted in curiosity and self-discovery.



## **Conclusion & Recommendations**

### Embracing Play for Holistic Development

Recognizing play's multifaceted benefits, encompassing cognitive, social, and emotional development, highlights the necessity of prioritizing play in educational settings (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Purvis, 2008). Several key strategies and initiatives can be employed to implement a more play-based, child-centered approach effectively.

Educational Initiatives seek to empower educators with play-based learning strategies through teacher training and ongoing professional development, while mentorship programs facilitate the exchange of best practices. Simultaneously, Policy Changes are essential for prioritizing play and supporting child-led learning. These changes include incorporating natural elements into playgrounds, promoting controlled risk-taking, and mandating outdoor playtime during school hours, combining unstructured play with nature ensures children benefit from holistic development.

### Educational Initiatives

Teacher training programs should incorporate play-based learning strategies to equip educators with the necessary tools and understanding to integrate play effectively into the curriculum (Ginsburg, 2007). This involves providing educators with workshops, seminars, and ongoing professional development opportunities focused on the principles of play-based learning. Additionally, mentorship programs pairing experienced educators with novices can facilitate the exchange of best practices and practical implementation strategies.

### Policy Changes

Policy changes are essential to reshaping educational environments and prioritizing play. Informed by research supporting child-led learning, policymakers should advocate for incorporating natural elements into playgrounds and promoting controlled risk-taking

within safe parameters (Fjørtoft, 2001; Little & Wyver, 2008). This can include allocating funding for developing natural play spaces within school grounds and revising safety regulations to accommodate adventurous play activities. Furthermore, policymakers can mandate a certain percentage of outdoor playtime during school hours to ensure children have regular exposure to the natural world.

### Coupling Play-Based Learning with the Natural World

When play-based learning approaches are coupled with experiences in the natural world, the learning rate increases significantly. Outdoor exploration provides children with opportunities for hands-on discovery, problem-solving, and creative expression (Fjørtoft, 2001; Little & Wyver, 2008). Integrating nature-based activities into the curriculum, such as outdoor science experiments, nature walks, and gardening projects, enhances children's connection to the environment while fostering a deeper understanding of academic concepts. Additionally, nature-based play environments offer diverse sensory experiences and encourage physical activity, promoting overall health and well-being in children.

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## The Child's Right to Play

Olga S. Jarrett

### Introduction

In the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the world has recognized that the rights of the child include the right to play. That right is the foundation for this White Paper, identifying areas of action that promote the child's right to play.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a treaty that the U.S. delegation helped to write during the 1980s under the Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations. It was unanimously adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1989 and signed by the U.S. in 1995 during the Clinton administration (Todres et al., 2006). The Convention spells out 40 substantive human rights to which children are entitled (Lichtsinn et al., 2023), including rights to a name and nationality, protection from violence and neglect, and care by parents unless endangering the child. It also protects against child labor, illicit drug trafficking, sexual exploitation, participation in armed conflict under the age of 15, and capital punishment or life imprisonment without possibility of parole. Among the 54 articles is Article 31, identifying play as a fundamental right of the child.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is an important part of the history of I.P.A. World since I.P.A. made recommendations for Article 31 and advocated for General Comment #17 (United Nations, 2013), a description of the meaning of the right to play. Article 31 states:

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the child's age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational, and leisure activity.

By signing, the U.S. indicated its intention to ratify the treaty. However, because the Convention on the Rights of the Child is an international treaty, according to the U.S. Constitution, it needs to be ratified by two-thirds of the Senate (Todres et al., 2006). So far, 196 countries have ratified the Convention, leaving the U.S. as the only nation that has not yet done so. This treaty has not even been introduced in the Senate. By not ratifying the Convention, the U.S. is not a member of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the international body that monitors implementation. According to Lichtsinn et al. (2023), the failure to ratify has contributed to "poor health outcomes for American children in comparison to other high-income countries" as well as "other social inequities."

How is the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31 in particular, affecting the rest of the world? According to a report on the work of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (Lansdown, 2022), the Committee found some initial confusion among States Parties on the nature and importance of play. Initially, the Committee's primary work focused on other sections of the Convention. This report recognized that the rights to rest, play, recreation, and cultural and artistic activities were initially "one of the most neglected rights in the reporting process, with States Parties rarely seeking to reference measures undertaken to ensure its realization." The Committee on the Rights of the Child authorized General Comment #17 to clarify the meaning of play, leisure, and recreation and the importance of these rights [for the full General Comment, see U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) and for a summary see IPA World (2013)]. According to General Comment #17, the following is the definition of play:

Children's play is any behaviour, activity, or process initiated, controlled, and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. Caregivers may contribute to the creation of environments in

which play takes place, but play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation, and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end. Play involves the exercise of autonomy, physical, mental or emotional activity, and has the potential to take infinite forms, either in groups or alone. These forms will change and be adapted throughout the course of childhood. The key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility, and non-productivity. Together, these factors contribute to the enjoyment it produces and the consequent incentive to continue to play. While play is often considered non-essential, the Committee reaffirms that it is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development (pp. 5-6).

The Committee (Lansdown, 2022) currently recognizes that play, recreation, rest, leisure, and cultural life are not optional extras but rather are a fundamental part of childhood and that solutions often involve attitude change rather than allocation of resources. The Committee also has noted that Article 31 relates to many of the other articles, including Article 2, ensuring the rights of inclusion regardless of gender or marginalization by society; Article 3 concerning resource allocation and planning; Article 6, considering the developmental needs of children, and Article 12 enabling choice and autonomy. In addition, the Committee has linked requirements from 15 other articles to Article 31. One of the Committee's concerns has been that too much schoolwork can interfere with rest and play.

### **How Should We Approach the Convention on the Rights of the Child**

Have U.S. organizations made any effort to get the Convention ratified? The Campaign for U.S. Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child was launched in 2003 in Washington, D.C. This organization developed an advocacy toolkit for U.S. ratification (2009) that is still available for organizations and individuals wishing to take effective action. However, the campaign seems to have morphed into Children's Rights ([childrensrights.org](http://childrensrights.org)), which tackles abuses of children's rights in the U.S.,

including abuses in foster care policy, child welfare law, child mental health, immigration rights, incarceration, LGBTQ+ rights, and racial justice. The right to play is embedded in all of these abuses. Currently, this group seems to be focused on abolishing child rights abuses in the U.S. despite the lack of ratification.

A group that is still campaigning to ratify the Convention in the U.S. is Human Rights Educators U.S.A. (2024). They have formed "a collaborative network to learn, teach, organize, advocate, and innovate for human rights education in the United States," one of their goals is to empower both educators and learners. Their website includes resolutions by cities and states in support of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 2019, they developed an updated advocacy tool kit (still available on their website) to commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Their website also includes contact information for anyone wishing to get involved.

In 2007, UNICEF produced a handbook with recommendations for implementing the Convention. Even though the U.S. has signed but not ratified the Convention, the following recommendations for implementation are worth considering. Questions to consider for implementing Article 31 include the following (Pinheiro, 2007, pp. 477-478):

- Are necessary measures taken to secure the right of the child to rest and leisure?
- Do such measures include prohibitions on children working at night or working throughout all school holiday periods?
- Have I.L.O. (International Labour Organization) Conventions Nos.79 and 90 been ratified?
- Do compulsory school hours and homework regimes allow for rest and leisure periods?
- Does environmental planning take into account the play needs of children?
- Does this planning take account of children's views of what is needed?
- Are play and recreational opportunities appropriate to all ages of children (including preschoolers and teenagers) available without discrimination?



- Are resources allocated for sports, culture, and the arts divided fairly between adults and children?
- Do all children have reasonable access to all cultural and artistic events?
- Are there any limitations on the participation of all children in cultural life and the arts?
- Are cultural and artistic events organized specially for children?
- Are children given access to cultural and artistic events through financial concessions or discounts?
- Do children with disabilities have access to integrated recreational, cultural and artistic activities?
- Do children in hospital have opportunities for play and recreational activities?
- Do children in institutions have opportunities for play, sports, and recreational, artistic and cultural activities?
- Do children whose liberty has been restricted have opportunities for physical exercise, recreation, and artistic or cultural activities?
- Are measures taken to ensure that girls have as equal an opportunity as boys for rest, leisure, play, and recreation, and to enjoy cultural and artistic activities

These questions are important for any U.S. organization seeking to promote the child's right to play. The U.S. cannot assume that American children's right to play is protected (Jarrett et al. (2023). Research shows that deprivation of the child's right to play exists in schools when sufficient recess is not allowed, in the juvenile justice system when recreation is minimized, when appropriate childcare is unaffordable, when poor neighborhoods lack well-maintained parks and playgrounds, and when screen time substitutes for play. However, given the political situation, it is not likely that the Convention on the Rights of the Child would be approved by 2/3 of the U.S. Senate.

Should we give up on ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child? Definitely not. We cannot wait until the time is right to take action in the Senate. Organizations that care about the welfare of children can take action on many issues

while informing politicians at all levels of the child's need for play. Moreover, we must not let senators forget about the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Letter-writing campaigns are appropriate. Cities and States can be encouraged to pass resolutions supporting the Convention. Legislation for children's rights can be introduced at the state and local levels. Parents can be educated on the importance of children's rights, especially the right to play, and organizations can collaborate to establish recreational programs for children. Children should also learn in school about the rights protected by the Convention.

## **Conclusion**

IPAUSA and other organizations supporting this white paper can collaborate to advocate for the child's right to play, which needs to be supported, whether or not the U.S. becomes a state party to this important Convention on the Rights of the Child. This informative white paper includes the following general topics with background and recommendations for actions that can be taken to protect the child's right to play:

- Children's rights identified
- Play across the lifespan
- Play as a biological necessity
- Readiness explored
- The need for breaks
- The importance of experiences in nature
- The healing power of play
- The economics of play

The references cited below include references to this document and general information on advocating for the child's right to play. They provide useful background information for the entire white paper.

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## Play and Social Justice

Olga S. Jarrett

### Introduction

According to the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, all children have the right to play. However, in the United States, it is obvious that not all children have the same opportunities for quality play. This white paper identifies areas of injustice. In many cases, white children have more play advantages than children of color, and children from more wealthy families have more play opportunities than children from poorer families. Social justice involves equity rather than equality. Equality involves treating everyone the same as a question of fairness. However, equity recognizes that some people start at a disadvantage, and we “must acknowledge and make adjustments to imbalances...requiring us to identify and overcome intentional and unintentional barriers arising from bias or systemic structures (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2024). For example, a school system provides bottom-line playground equipment at all its schools equally. However, schools with wealthier families raise money to add more challenging, fun, and accessible play equipment to the playground. Resources and funding formulas across schools might be equal but not equitable if the need for resources (teachers, equipment, or materials) is greater in some schools than others or opportunities for significant fundraising in some schools are limited (Stenhouse, 2023, p. 22). Equity is generally needed to “level the playing field.” It's imperative that we take action to create more equitable play opportunities for all children, and your role as educators, policymakers, parents, and advocates for children's rights is crucial in this endeavor. You have the power to make a difference.

This white paper explores the following issues of social justice: availability and length of recess, quality of school playgrounds, availability of community parks and playgrounds, play opportunities for children with disabilities, availability of culturally appropriate play and learning materials such as books and dolls, affordability of children's museums and other museums and zoos, school punishment policies, play opportunities in detention centers, and play opportunities in children's hospitals. Much of

the material in this white paper is condensed from Jarrett, Stenhouse, Sutterby, & Patte (2023). In the book, *In a Test-driven Culture, is it still OK to play?* It is relevant because play and social justice are the book's themes.

### **Availability and Length of Recess**

In many communities, the length of recess and whether children have recess at all has long been inequitable. Roth et al. (2002) found that 79% of the children had recess on a randomly selected school day. However, only 61% of the Black students and 75% of other minority students had recess compared to 85% of White students. Also, only 56% of those living below the poverty line had recess compared to 83% of those above the poverty line. Examining Atlanta area school system policies in 2003 revealed that the three school systems with high percentages of White and higher-income children allowed recess. In contrast, three school systems with high percentages of Black children and children in poverty had a policy forbidding recess (Jarrett, 2003). In a survey of 1,055 schools, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2007) also found disparities between the recess haves and have-nots with large, urban, Southeastern schools with high poverty and large proportions of Black and Latinx children having the least recess, sometimes none at all. More recent trends are similar. Although most children in Seattle typically get recess, Black students get 30 minutes of recess compared to 45 minutes for White students (Dornfeld, 2019). Georgia school systems are now supposed to have recess for 30 minutes daily, at least when they do not have PE. However, in 2024, in an Atlanta area school system, a student teacher/mother reported that her students, almost all of them Black, rarely had recess.

Overall, school policies are made at the state level, and some states have passed legislation mandating recess and not allowing it to be taken away as punishment. Legislation is needed in all states to ensure that ALL children have recess.

## **Quality of Parks and Playgrounds**

A study of school playgrounds in one Southern County found that schools with high percentages of Black or Hispanic students and a large percentage of students eligible for Free or Reduced-price lunch had lower-rated playgrounds than schools that were predominantly White or multi-ethnic and had fewer students receiving Free or Reduced-price lunch. A study of community playgrounds in the same county found that zip codes with a lower proportion of White residents had more crowded parks (15,409.4 residents per park) than zip codes with a higher proportion of White residents (7,094.7 residents per park) (Jarrett et al., 2023a). A descriptive study of two Texas school districts, one predominantly White and the other predominantly Hispanic, found similar disparities in playground quality and upkeep. The White district had better playground equipment and was more accessible for children with disabilities (Sutterby & Hernandez, 2023). A study of Philadelphia schools found that the urban schools had “inadequate equipment,” whereas suburban schools had “elaborate climbers and lush fields” (Beresin, 2023, p. 136).

## **Play Opportunities for Children with Disabilities and Illnesses**

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 2010), playgrounds built after March 15, 2012, must meet Standards for Accessible Design. Children using mobility devices must be able to access the playground area (see ADA, 2010—standards for play areas). In the playground study (Jarrett et al., 2023), many of the school playgrounds were not accessible either because of design or because of lack of upkeep. In addition to ensuring play is accessible, teachers need to ensure children with mobility challenges are not abandoned by other children who can move more easily when playing. Hospitalized children also need opportunities to play, opportunities that are considered therapeutic. Children’s hospitals generally have play therapists and playrooms (Sutterby & Patte, 2023). However, poor rural children may have less access to specialized children’s hospitals that have play opportunities.

## **Quality Day Care**

Of critical importance is the provision of safe, play-based childcare for all children. In single-parent households and families where both parents work at low-paying jobs, quality childcare can be prohibitively expensive, and too often, childcare becomes custodial only. Young (2023) challenges our nation to ensure that all children can access childcare with high-quality play opportunities.

## **Culturally Appropriate Play and Learning Materials**

Children should have access to play materials that are appropriate to their culture. Such play materials are much more available now than they were several decades ago. Now, there are dolls and dollhouse families with various skin tones and play foods from various cultures. Also, classrooms should have non-stereotypical books with which children of different races and cultures can identify. A history of research on Black children's preference for White dolls (Clark & Clark, 1939; Jarrett, 2016; Sturdivant, 2023) suggests that Black children have long shown and still show continuing preference for White dolls. Culturally diverse materials should be available for all children, and staff should model the appropriateness of various cultural expressions. Given that children often play out what they see and hear at home, teachers need to accept what is in the *play frame* and interpret it to other children so the play can continue.

## **Community Resources Affordability of museums and zoos**

Attractions such as children's museums, art museums, science museums, zoos, and aquaria offer fun and learning opportunities. In a few cities (St. Louis, for example), most of these attractions are free for the public. However, in many cities, such attractions are quite expensive, and families in poverty are not able to attend (Sutterby & Jarrett, 2023). Periodic free days for families, as well as funds for school field trips,



could allow **all** children to experience the fun as well as the educational value of such experiences.

### **Fun as part of the curriculum**

A “test-driven culture” has taken a lot of the fun out of school (Jarrett & Patte, 2023). The curriculum has become rigid, and some states have increased instruction time for literacy and mathematics while decreasing time for science, social studies, art, music, and recess, subjects and activities that skillful teachers can make engaging and fun. According to Glasser (1986), children behave better when their needs for belonging, power, freedom, and *fun* are met. It is possible to include playful activities such as projects, drama, art, and activities that connect students with one another while engaging in fun and learning. From Kindergarten through high school, schools can be created where children want to participate. Furthermore, creativity born of play is essential not just in school but also in the workplace (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006).

### **School to Prison Pipeline**

When students are not allowed to collaborate, they do not see themselves in the curriculum, feel powerless, and have no fun. These students spend time in isolated in-school suspension as punishment; some start skipping school, and many drop out. This is the beginning of the school-to-prison pipeline (Jarrett & Sutterby, 2023). This pipeline includes over-assignment to in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and youth detention centers with insufficient recreation and a lack of opportunities to interact with others in positive, fun ways. The final stop on the pipeline is adult prison, where there are generally fewer opportunities to engage in recreation, interact with peers in fun ways, and learn social skills.

## Conclusions

The bottom line is that children of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds should have the opportunity and encouragement to learn in physically, intellectually, and socially active ways. Play is an important and essential part of that learning, and cultural differences in play should be respected. A multicultural nation benefits from encouraging children to play together across racial and socioeconomic differences. Ensuring access to playgrounds, parks, museums, libraries, zoos, and recess are viewed through the lens of equity is necessary to create spaces where all children can play.

This white paper includes many details on various worthwhile aspects of play. Given the history of racism in America and the growing disparity between rich and poor of all races, the recommendations in this white paper should be examined for the effects on ALL children so that all children reap the benefits that play can offer.

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## Children Playing with Others: A Mother's Story

Melissa Briggs

### Introduction

I watched my 4-year-old son play at a playground. He was joyful and happy in his play. He squealed with laughter as he slid down the slide. He played alone and did not seem to mind at the time. He focused on the slide, and around and around he went. A few moments later, he caught the eye of a ball that rolled by. He ran after it, and so did the other children. He did not want to share; they did not include him, and he did not know what steps to take next. He stood there for a moment, unsure, and then moved to something different. I watched from afar, reflecting on how important it was for my child to play and how important it needed to be with others sometimes. Our son is neurodivergent, and he tends to play alone. He is happy playing alone, and I am not particularly eager to disrupt his happiness. However, I know his playing is missing a key aspect, which includes some of the play's most incredible superpowers. He needs to practice playing to connect with others, build bonds, and learn negotiation and engagement skills. Others need to play with him to know about differences, challenge their own beliefs, experience other perspectives, and learn negotiation and engagement skills to challenge their own beliefs, experience other perspectives, and to experience other perspectives, and also to learn negotiation and engagement.

### Background

Diversity and inclusion are growing concepts in our society. They include the importance of cultural sensitivity, inclusivity, and diversity in education and therapeutic practices.

The emergence of cultural awareness grew more robust in the mid-20th century; as awareness of cultural diversity and its impact on mental health grew, practitioners began to acknowledge the importance of considering cultural factors in mental health, education, and healthcare. Incorporation of cultural competence principles became an essential practice.

Therapists and educators recognize the need to understand and respect clients' and students' cultural backgrounds, beliefs, values, and identities. Diversity-informed practice has become standard and includes approaches emphasizing methods that integrate cultural competence, social justice, and advocacy into therapeutic work. Therapists and Educators strive to create inclusive and affirming therapeutic environments where clients from diverse backgrounds feel valued and understood. These practices have led to cultural adaptations and innovations.

Diversity-informed practice became common and includes approaches emphasizing practices of and includes approaches emphasize diversity-informed practice, which integrates cultural competence, social justice, and advocacy into therapeutic work. Therapists and Educators strive to create inclusive and affirming therapeutic environments where clients from diverse backgrounds feel valued and understood. This led to the ability to have cultural adaptations and innovations.

Overall, diversity and inclusivity reflect a broader movement within mental health, healthcare, education, and social science fields toward cultural competence, inclusivity, and social justice. Therapists and Educators continue to strive to create therapeutic spaces that honor and celebrate the diversity of human experience.

## **Strategies**

Reasons it is essential to include all children in play include:

1. Promotes Diversity and Inclusion: Inclusive play environments celebrate diversity and welcome children of all backgrounds, abilities, and identities. By including all children, regardless of differences, we teach acceptance, respect, and appreciation for diversity from an early age.
2. Fosters Empathy and Compassion: When children interact and play with peers with different abilities or backgrounds, they develop empathy, compassion, and an understanding of others' experiences. This helps break down stereotypes and promotes a more inclusive and compassionate society.

3. **Enhances Social Skills:** Inclusive play allows children to practice important social skills such as communication, cooperation, and collaboration. Children learn to work together, solve problems, and navigate social situations in diverse and inclusive settings.
4. **Builds Self-Esteem and Confidence:** When all children are included in play, regardless of their abilities or differences, they feel valued, respected, and accepted for who they are. This boosts their self-esteem and confidence, creating a positive sense of self-worth.
5. **Encourages Friendship and Peer Support:** Inclusive play environments foster friendships and peer support networks among children. Children who interact and play together form bonds based on shared experiences and interests, regardless of differences.
6. **Supports Learning and Development:** Inclusive play provides rich learning opportunities for all children. Children learn from each other's strengths, perspectives, and experiences, expanding their knowledge and understanding of the world around them.
7. **Reduces Bullying and Exclusion:** Inclusive play environments help reduce bullying and exclusion by promoting a culture of kindness, acceptance, and inclusion. When all children are included and valued, there is less room for negative behaviors such as teasing, discrimination, or social isolation.
8. **Strengthens Community Bonds:** Inclusive play fosters a sense of community and belonging among children, families, and caregivers. It brings people together, promotes positive relationships, and creates a supportive network of individuals who care for and support each other.
9. **Prepares Children for a Diverse World:** Inclusive play prepares children for the diverse and inclusive world they will encounter as they grow up. It equips them with the skills, attitudes, and values to navigate diverse environments and build inclusive communities.

Including all children in play fosters social inclusion, empathy, and understanding among peers. Here are some strategies for inclusivity in play:

**Provide Diverse Play Materials:** Offer a variety of toys, games, and materials that cater to different interests, abilities, and preferences. This can include toys representing diverse cultures, characters with varying abilities, and activities that appeal to different genders.

**Encourage Cooperative Play:** Promote activities that require cooperation, teamwork, and mutual support. Encourage children to work together to achieve common goals, whether building a structure, completing a puzzle, or playing a group game.

**Create Inclusive Play Spaces:** Design play environments that are accessible and welcoming to all children, including those with disabilities. Ensure that play areas are barrier-free, provide seating options for children needing rest breaks, and include sensory-friendly elements for children with sensory sensitivities.

**Facilitate Peer Buddies:** Pair children up as peer buddies to encourage friendship and support between peers. Peer buddies can assist each other during play, offer encouragement, and help bridge communication barriers.

**Model Inclusive Behavior:** Model inclusive attitudes and behaviors by treating all children with respect, kindness, and empathy. Use inclusive language and actively challenge stereotypes or discriminatory behavior when it arises.

**Offer Choice and Autonomy:** Allow children to choose how and with whom they play. Respect their autonomy and preferences and encourage them to express themselves freely without fear of judgment or exclusion.

**Promote Social Skills Development:** Teach and model social skills such as sharing, taking turns, and resolving conflicts peacefully. Provide guidance and support as children navigate social interactions and relationships during play.

**Celebrate Diversity:** Incorporate activities that celebrate diversity and promote cultural understanding. Encourage children to share their cultural traditions, languages, and customs with their peers, fostering appreciation and respect for different cultures.



**Address Bullying and Exclusion:** Take proactive steps to prevent bullying and exclusion in the play environment. Educate children about the importance of kindness, empathy, and inclusivity, and intervene promptly if you observe bullying or exclusion.

**Collaborate with Families:** Partner with families to understand each child's individual needs and preferences and how best to support their inclusion in play activities. Solicit input from parents and caregivers and work together to create a supportive and inclusive play environment for all children.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, including all children in play is essential for promoting diversity, fostering empathy, enhancing social skills, building self-esteem, and creating inclusive communities where every child feels valued, respected, and supported. It benefits not only the individual children but also society. By implementing these strategies, you can create a play environment where all children feel valued, included, and empowered to participate fully in play activities.

## **Equity in Play: Ensuring Inclusive Play and Learning for All Children**

**Cindy Lee and Alexa Poyner**

### **Introduction**

Ensuring equitable access for every student to inclusive play continues to be a crucial challenge in education. Despite growing research on the importance of inclusive play in fostering social-emotional growth and improving educational outcomes, significant disparities hinder access to playful learning for all. This issue is multifaceted, including physical barriers in play spaces, social exclusion due to stigmatization or lack of awareness, and inadequate support systems for children with diverse needs. Without proactive measures to address these challenges, many children, particularly those with disabilities or special needs, continue to encounter exclusion and limited opportunities for meaningful play experiences. Therefore, achieving equitable access to inclusive play will require complex and comprehensive strategies that ensure every child can thrive and participate fully in playful learning.

### **Background and Importance of Inclusive Play**

Inclusive play refers to creating opportunities for children of all abilities and backgrounds to participate in and enjoy different types of play activities together. It allows each child to play and express themselves uniquely while supporting them in engaging in play together when they desire (Casey, 2010). It might involve customizing or adapting activities, identifying specific environments for accessibility, and providing appropriate materials to ensure all children can fully participate and feel a sense of belonging. Inclusive play should promote social interaction and increase cooperation among children of diverse backgrounds and abilities. The main goal is to break down barriers and instill a sense of community and acceptance among all children.

## **Importance of Inclusive Play for Child Development**

Research consistently supports play's importance and positive impact on child development and academic outcomes. When we create inclusive play environments, we can ensure all children have access to playful learning opportunities while supporting their overall growth and promoting a more inclusive and equitable society. Playful learning promotes the development of social skills, language, and communication and improves cognition.

During collaborative play sessions, children develop crucial social-emotional, problem-solving, and imaginative abilities (NAEYC & DEC, 2009). A study by Hatcher et al. (2012) highlighted the link between school readiness and social-emotional growth, emphasizing the importance of effective peer interactions. Another 2016 study found that playful interactions that include rich language and back-and-forth exchanges lead to significant gains in language (Weisberg et al). When children with diverse abilities interact and learn together through play, they create opportunities for socialization, skill development, and mutual support (Kesäläinen et al., 2019). This study highlighted the many benefits of providing inclusive play opportunities, particularly in promoting cognitive and language development, regardless of individual abilities or backgrounds (Kesäläinen et al., 2019).

## **The Issue at Hand: Ensuring Access for All Children**

Many international and national educational organizations advocate for the crucial role of play in children's development worldwide. During the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31 was created to highlight the significance of play in children's optimal growth (IPA, 2016). Children across all age groups inherently crave play, which becomes more complex as they mature. The International Play Association asserts that play is essential for children's physical and mental development and for fostering productive, functional members of their culture and society (IPA, 2016).

Access to equitable play opportunities is critical to a child's overall development. Play has numerous benefits, including physical and mental well-being, social and emotional growth, and improved academic outcomes. It allows children to build strength, coordination, and resilience while also learning important social skills such as cooperation and empathy.

Play is crucial for child health and development and is a fundamental right, providing opportunities for social, cognitive, and physical growth (James et al., 2022). Equitable play spaces foster inclusivity by catering to children with disabilities, promoting acceptance and community engagement. Many children lack access to play opportunities, which is particularly problematic in marginalized communities (Huang et al., 2022). By addressing disparities in access to play, we can create healthier, more cohesive communities and provide all children with equal opportunities to thrive (Huang et al., 2022).

Inclusive playgrounds provide opportunities for diverse children to engage in various forms of play and interaction (James et al., 2022). Such playgrounds can promote social inclusion and support the development of social skills by facilitating play among children of different abilities and backgrounds (James et al., 2022). The study underscores the importance of designing inclusive playgrounds to foster social integration and equal play opportunities for all children (James et al., 2022).

### **Challenges and Barriers to Inclusive Play**

A 2021 study out of the Netherlands focused on understanding the barriers, facilitators, and solutions for the participation of children with physical disabilities in active play (van Engelen, 2021). Through qualitative research involving interviews with parents and professionals, the study reveals that emotional barriers, such as fear and overprotection from parents, play a significant role in hindering participation, alongside physical barriers like inaccessible playgrounds (van Engelen, 2021). Social and attitudinal challenges, including stigma and lack of inclusive societal structures, further

impact children's ability to engage in play (van Engelen, 2021). Both parents and professionals emphasize the importance of inclusive education, early intervention, and coaching to support play and inclusion (van Engelen, 2021). The findings suggest a need for systemic changes in society to improve inclusion and play opportunities for children with disabilities.

### **Strategies to Promote Inclusivity in Play**

Educators can use various strategies to promote inclusivity in play for all students. Beginning with providing training and support for educators to better understand and address the diverse needs of all children, educators can become more sensitive to the unique needs of individual students. Another way to promote inclusivity is to provide a variety of play materials and equipment that are accessible and appropriate to children of different abilities and backgrounds. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires all playgrounds to be accessible to children with disabilities. However, we must take it further and ensure that all play environments promote inclusivity (1990).

The solution to providing accessible play opportunities for all children is multifaceted. It is vital to create a welcoming and inclusive play environment that encourages all children to participate (Mitchell, 2015). In addition, it is necessary to develop activities that can be adapted to accommodate different needs, such as the sensory needs of students who require adaptations in this area. Playful environments should include the principle of universal design for all so that any child, regardless of their abilities, can access and benefit from play.

It is essential to encourage cooperation and teamwork among children during play. Another way to promote inclusivity is to facilitate opportunities for children to learn about and appreciate different perspectives and experiences. Lastly, it is essential to collaborate with families, caregivers, and community resources to create a supportive and inclusive play environment for all children.

## **Empowering Parents to Advocate for Inclusive Play**

Parents can use various strategies to encourage inclusive play among children. They can start by modeling inclusive behavior, treating others with respect and kindness, and promoting empathy and understanding of different perspectives and experiences. Parents can also provide opportunities for their children to interact with peers from diverse backgrounds and abilities, helping them understand the importance of inclusivity and the benefits of playing with others who may be different from them.

A 2021 study revealed that children with disabilities and their parents experience fewer positive interactions at local playgrounds due to a lack of inclusive environments and societal acceptance (Heusden, 2021). This highlights the need for community-oriented approaches and collaboration among municipalities, educational institutes, and parents to create welcoming play spaces for all children (Heusden, 2021). Encouraging children to include others in their play activities and to be open to making new friends can foster a sense of community. Organizing playdates or group activities that promote collaboration and cooperation among children can further support inclusive play. Additionally, providing toys and games that encourage teamwork, problem-solving, and communication skills can help children develop essential social skills. Teaching children effective communication and peaceful conflict resolution is also crucial for fostering a supportive play environment. Finally, parents can support their children in standing up against bullying or exclusion of others and celebrating and valuing diversity within the family and community. By implementing these strategies, parents can help foster a sense of inclusivity, empathy, and acceptance among children, both at home and in their interactions with others.

### **Peer-Mediated Strategies**

Play design should reflect the diversity of children's play styles and needs, encompassing physical, creative, and social aspects. Additionally, it should consider children's varied abilities, such as visual or hearing impairments, learning difficulties,

and mental health issues (Sensory Trust, 2024). The goal is to create a rich mix of play opportunities that engage all the senses and offer a variety of spaces, including both active and quiet areas (Sensory Trust, 2024). Educators can help make play inclusive for all students by designing play opportunities to ensure they are engaging for all children, regardless of disability and circumstance.

Adults can also provide guidance and assistance to children with disabilities in accessing play. This could include helping students with disabilities learn a game's rules or guiding them in different activities (Guardians, 2024). Peers can also encourage teamwork and community by creating a welcoming and inclusive environment where everyone feels accepted and included (Guardians, 2024). Additionally, peers can communicate with teachers or adults to address any challenges or barriers that may arise in including students with disabilities in play activities (Guardians, 2024). Overall, peers play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and participation for all students, regardless of their abilities.

## **Accessible Play Spaces and Equipment**

Designing a play area to meet building codes is typically not sufficient and does not address the principles of Universal Design for Learning. Universal Design aims to create products, communications, and environments accessible and usable by the broadest range of people without requiring modifications or customized solutions (Center for Universal Design, 2008). Universal Design inherently integrates principles of accessibility and inclusion.

Play spaces created with Universal Design principles provide inclusive environments where children of all abilities can play and enjoy activities together. These spaces prioritize accessibility for children at different developmental stages and abilities, appealing to their five senses and creating safe, exploratory environments (Hansen, 2020). They also support parents with disabilities by allowing them to supervise and engage in their child's play experiences. When evaluating existing play spaces, it is

important to apply Universal Design principles to all aspects of the space, including entrances, pathways, layout, and play equipment, while also considering provincial and local requirements for safety and accessible design (Hansen, 2020). This ensures that a diverse range of users can access and enjoy the play space, including those with visual, auditory, mobility, cognitive, or sensory disabilities (Hansen, 2020). Features such as multi-functional play areas, varied equipment, and clear lines of sight for caregivers contribute to a rich, inclusive play experience (Hansen, 2020).

When planning play spaces for individuals with mobility disabilities, it is essential to consider their diverse needs, including those of wheelchair users, people with limited mobility or muscle weakness, and individuals who use various mobility devices (Hansen, 2020). The design should include accessible paths, multiple access routes, and ground-level and elevated play equipment accessible by ramps or transfer platforms (Hansen, 2020). Additionally, it needs features that provide space for maneuverability and interaction between caregivers and children (Hansen, 2020).

Accommodations such as seating with back support and transfer platforms enable inclusive play experiences (Hansen, 2020). For individuals with hearing disabilities, clear lines of sight are essential for observing children, while avoiding sharp sounds and static electricity from plastic slides can improve the experience for hearing aids and cochlear implant users (Hansen, 2020). For those with vision disabilities, strong contrasting colors, textures, and sound cues help users navigate the space and access equipment safely (Hansen, 2020). Designs should avoid shiny surfaces to prevent glare and avoid red-green and green-blue color combinations for color-blind users (Hansen, 2020). Additionally, sensory-friendly elements such as natural settings and motion activities can benefit children with autism spectrum disorder (Hansen, 2020). Involving specialists and stakeholders in the planning process helps ensure the play space is inclusive and accessible to all.



## Conclusion/Recommendations

Ensuring equitable access to inclusive play for all children requires a multifaceted approach that addresses physical, social, and systemic barriers. Implementing Universal Design principles in play spaces can help create environments that are welcoming and accessible to children of all abilities, supporting their overall development and fostering a sense of community. These spaces should include various play options, appealing to different senses and developmental stages and providing opportunities for safe and stimulating play experiences. Creating inclusive play environments promotes social interaction, cooperation, and acceptance among children from diverse backgrounds and abilities.

To achieve equitable play opportunities, stakeholders must collaborate and advocate for policies and practices prioritizing inclusivity in play spaces. This includes consulting with experts and families to understand the needs of children with disabilities and creating accessible pathways, equipment, and play structures. Educators and parents can play critical roles in modeling inclusive behaviors and encouraging children to embrace diversity in play. Additionally, involving children in the planning process can help ensure that play spaces reflect their preferences and interests. By taking these actions, we can create inclusive play environments that allow every child to thrive and learn through play, leading to a more equitable and supportive society.

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## The Playwork Approach to Supporting Play

Dr. Shelly Newstead

### Introduction

One of the most interesting and yet perhaps frustrating issues for play advocates and professionals is that 'play' can be understood and is defined in so many different ways. Adults imbue a deceptively simple word describing children's activity with a whole panoply of conflicting (often competing) rationales, aims, and outcomes. Apparently, innocuous phrases like 'supporting play' become fraught with confusion and debates about the 'right' or 'best' way for adults to support play, fueled by different understandings of the nature and purpose of play.

In its 70+ years, the UK playwork field has never shied away from debates and disagreements amongst itself (Williams, 1986). However, when it comes to play, playworkers and playwork practitioners generally agree that play is an activity that should be defined and driven by children themselves. While this understanding of play is defined differently by different schools of playwork, it does provide the basis of a common approach to the adult role in terms of 'supporting play.' This paper presents two fundamental playwork theories which enable playwork practitioners to focus on the playwork version of play.

### Background

Playwork has its origins in the adventure playgrounds developed in the UK after the Second World War (Newstead, 2018). It wasn't until the 1980s that the idea of playworkers as facilitators and providers of play was introduced by adventure playground workers struggling to find a rationale for their existence (Hughes & Williams, 1982). At that time, there was a general feeling that playworkers all knew what each other meant by play, based on a shared perspective derived from observations of how children play when left to their own devices on adventure playgrounds. Yet, there was

no consistent way of describing this understanding of play (Hughes, 2006). Bob Hughes, a practicing adventure playground worker at the time, developed a new narrative of 'playwork play' in 1982, with different iterations published in various playwork publications over the next few decades. The most recent adaptation appears in the Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005).

*Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated.*

Hughes' intention in establishing a playwork 'definition' of play (as it is often described in playwork) was to distinguish the sort of play that playworkers are interested in supporting from other interpretations of play involving more adult-centric aims and outcomes for children. Although widely adopted by playworkers as their "ludic mantra" (Candler, 1999, p. 230), Hughes' description of play has also attracted considerable criticism. One such area of debate is whether any behaviour can ever be said to be truly 'freely chosen' or 'personally directed,' particularly in playwork settings where children are often powerless to choose their play space or direct much of what happens in it (Brown, 2008; King & Howard, 2014). Such contradictions often result in real dilemmas and even feelings of guilt for adults doing their best to support children's 'freely chosen' play in restrictive environments (Dodge, 2022), where adults must often outlaw children's choices. To avoid such ambiguities, PARS playwork uses Professor Joe Frost's description of play to focus adult minds on what is meant in playwork by the word 'play'; "play which bubbles up from inside the child instead of as a result of adult directives" (Frost, 2010, p. 267).

The 1990s was a time when playworkers in the UK felt that their perspective on play was in danger of being overwhelmed by a variety of conflicting adult agendas for children in general and play in particular (Morgan, 1999). Hughes' description of play in playwork terms paved the way for playworkers to see themselves as adults with a legitimate understanding of play and to explain their fundamentally different approach to supporting children's play to those outside the playwork field. In this context of playwork tentatively exploring its own identity, two playwork theories were developed by

practicing adventure playground workers: Bob Hughes' Taxonomy of Play Types (1996) and Sturrock and Else's Play Cycle theory (1998). Both these theories are still in general use in playwork today to help adults consider their role in supporting children's play without imposing adult outcomes or agendas so that, in the words of one of the adventure playground pioneers, "children can do what they need to do and not what adults think they ought to do" (Abernethy, 1968, p 17).

### **Appropriate approaches/strategies**

#### *Play types (Hughes, 1996)*

'Play types' is a term widely used in the play literature to refer to categorizations and descriptions of different forms of play and/or the benefits of different forms of play for children (see: Parten, 1932; Smilansky, 1968; van der Kooij, 2007; Thomson, 2003). The term 'play types' in playwork generally refers to one specific model: Bob Hughes' 'A Playworker's Taxonomy of Play Types' (Hughes, 1996).

This seminal playwork text was developed from Hughes' exploration of the academic play literature and published to provide playworkers with an easily accessible professional vocabulary for what they instinctively knew (Hughes, 2006). The first edition included fifteen play types and was revised in 2002 with the addition of 'recapitulative play' (see Hughes 2006 for further discussion on this). Although Hughes fully intended that there should be further updates to his taxonomy, his only other major publication in this specific area was 'Play Types – Speculations and Possibilities' (Hughes, 2006), an exploratory text in which he developed some of his own thinking and discussions about play types in the playwork field. The only other significant work on Hughes' play types was published posthumously by Perry Else (2014), although Hughes' (2002) version of play types is still the most widely used (King & Newstead, 2024).

Hughes (2006, p.xiii) defined 'play types' as "the term we use to describe the different visible behaviours we observe when children are playing." The second edition of the Taxonomy of Play Types (Hughes, 2002) includes brief notes for playworkers on



the sort of play scenarios that might fit into each play type, with hints and tips on how playworkers might be able to support the play types in their settings. This practical element of this work is limited, perhaps on the assumption that playworkers would instinctively recognise play when they saw it, and therefore what was most useful was the name for different types of play and the references to the literature. As Hughes (2006) reflected, playworkers already knew that children played in many different ways and that this was important for children: they did not know how to articulate that aspect of their work. Hughes, therefore, focused mainly on the need for playworkers to provide for different play types in their settings and to describe play types when they saw them.

Despite the position of Hughes' play types as a foundation of playwork theory and practice, there is still a paucity of literature to support its teaching and development. One of the common approaches to Hughes' taxonomy is using some of the more 'controversial' play types to highlight where adults may be inclined to curtail children's activities because they contravene adult notions of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' play. For example, Hughes defines 'deep play' as "play that is irrational to engage in because of its potential danger to life, limb or reputation" (2002, p12). Interestingly, Hughes also proposes 'risky play' as an alternative name for this play type.) Such a stark allusion to the potential of mortality through play can come as a bit of a shock to the adult ear. Hughes' view is that this play type is essential for children and should not be prohibited by fearful adults because "the world is a dangerous place in which children have to learn how to survive" (2002, p.13). However, Hughes also stresses that children who are ready for and seek out deep play experiences should only be accessed by children who seek them out, rather than actively facilitated by adults. This is also a serious consideration when designing play structures for children, where "Difficulty of access should be designed into any structure, where the ultimate challenge might be too great for some children" (2002, p13).

Hughes highlights many such contentious issues regarding adult reactions to certain play types and provides much 'food for thought' for adults who want to explore their approach to play. However, the Taxonomy of Play also lacks the in-depth practical guidance necessary for inexperienced playwork practitioners to practice Hughes' play

types. Whilst “indicators” are provided to help adults spot signs that a child might be engaging in the different play types, there is a distinct lack of guidance in the Taxonomy for the practitioner to know how to support them – or to judge whether support is appropriate at all. While depth might be lacking in Hughes’ original Taxonomy, his brief ideas about the importance of particular play types and their potential practical application certainly provide much debate for adults considering their approach to supporting play.

### *The Play Cycle (Sturrock & Else, 1998)*

In contrast to Hughes’ play types, which separate play into different categories, Sturrock and Else’s (1998) Play Cycle theory is based on a conceptualization of play as one continuous process involving recognizable stages of transition. This ‘play cycle’ provides a theoretical model for adults to recognise and describe the process of play rather than the products of play or its benefits to children from an adult perspective.

Gordon Sturrock and Perry Else were both active in the playwork field as practitioners and in playwork education and training in various roles. Else was made a Professor of Play Studies at Sheffield Hallam University shortly before he died in 2014 (Armitage, 2014). Gordon Sturrock first developed the play cycle for his MA thesis. He later adapted and published (Sturrock & Else, 1998) in "The Playground as Therapeutic Space: Playwork as Healing' presented at the IPA/USA Triennial National Conference held in Longmont, Colorado, USA (Else, 2014). Based on Sturrock and Else’s observations of children playing without the involvement of adults, the play cycle describes the process of play as they saw it in six stages: the meta-lude, play cue, play return, loop and flow, play frame, annihilation (Sturrock & Else, 1998). Although Else and Sturrock do not provide many references for these terms, a wealth of literature on the various elements of the play cycle can be found in other disciplines (see, for example, Caillois, 2001; Bateson, 1972). Echoes of the thinking behind different elements of the Play Cycle theory can also be traced in the literature of the adventure playground pioneers. For example, the concept of ‘annihilation’ in its physical form was fundamental to many of the early adventure playgrounds. Created as temporary

environments, the children deliberately destroyed them at the end of each season so that the playground could have a new face every year (Anderson, 1975).

Else and Sturrock variously define the terms used in the Play Cycle throughout their work, and it is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that those who use the Play Cycle theory have differing interpretations of their meanings (King & Newstead, 2019). In response to this finding, King and Newstead (2020) simplified and adapted the terminology used to describe the Play Cycle and its definitions as follows:

Pre-cue (or meta-lude)	A conscious or unconscious thought or idea within the child's inner world which may result in the issue of a play cue
Play cue	A verbal or non-verbal action expressed to the child's outer world as a signal or invitation to play
Play return	A verbal or non-verbal action from a person or object in the child's 'outer world' responding to the play cue
Flow (or the loop and flow)	Where play cues and play returns are continually being processed between the child's 'inner and outer world' resulting in the child appearing 'lost' in their play
Play frame	The visible (physical) or imagined (non-physical) boundary that keeps the Play Cycle intact for the play to continue
Annihilation	The play has finished where an element of the Play Cycle, or the play frame has no interest to the child

Practical and academic literature that develops the application of the Play Cycle theory to support children's play is more developed than the literature on Hughes' play types, although still limited given the broad scope of the theory itself. It is generally agreed in the practitioner literature that it is the responsibility of the playwork practitioner to recognise play cues and decide how to respond appropriately. The importance of adults issuing appropriate play returns and recognising play frames is also discussed (Kilvington & Wood, 2018). From an academic perspective, King's (2020) Play Cycle Observation Method is also now used in playwork education and other disciplines to

help practitioners to recognise different aspects of the Play Cycle (King et al., 2021). Playwork practitioners have reported that by using the play cycle, they have changed their views about specific behaviours in children and have been able to better support play as a result of being able to recognise different elements of the Play Cycle (King & Newstead, 2019).

## **Conclusion / Recommendations**

The playwork approach to play as a process that should be defined and driven by children does not suit all adults or settings. As noted at the start of this paper, there are many different interpretations of the word 'play'; none can be seen as more or less valid than the others. However, for those who prioritize children's ability to make their own decisions about why, how, and when they play, Hughes' Play Types and Sturrock and Else's Play Cycle theory are useful theories that could be more widely used by practitioners and those who educate and them to support play.

It is also the case that these pillars of playwork play are becoming dated and could be revisited and further developed, especially in terms of their practical application for supporting children's play. Neither the Play Cycle nor Play Types are directly supported by empirical evidence. However, a lot of play literature could be drawn on in addition to developing new empirical studies. Practical guidance is limited and scattered throughout academic literature and various textbooks, many of which are not easily accessible to practitioners or are outdated. Critiques of both theories would also help develop new playwork knowledge about how adults can support children's play without imposing adult outcomes or agendas. For example, the existence and nature of 'play cues' have been disputed in the play literature (Smith, 2009). However, this debate is not currently reflected in contemporary playwork literature, where theories are generally treated as factual guides to practice rather than well-developed ideas that might (or might not) shed new light on existing problems.

This White Paper on the playwork approach to supporting children's play, therefore, concludes with two recommendations:

- 1) That adults interested in children's play are familiar with Hughes' Taxonomy of Play Types and Sturrock and Else's Play Cycle theory
- 2) Playwork practitioners and academics interested in supporting children's play consider Hughes' Taxonomy of Play Types and Sturrock and Else's Play Cycle theory as areas for future academic and practical literature development.

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