

The American Association for the Child's Right to Play

POLICY BRIEF

Play is a Biological Necessity

WE BELIEVE

- **CHILDREN** are the foundation of the world's future.
- **CHILDREN** have always played in all cultures throughout history.
- **PLAY**, along with the basic needs of nutrition, health, shelter, and education, is vital to developing the potential of all children.
- **PLAY** is communication and expression, combining thought and action; it gives satisfaction and a feeling of achievement.
- **PLAY** is instinctive, voluntary, and spontaneous.
- **PLAY** helps children develop physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially.
- **PLAY** is a means of learning to live, not a mere passing of time. (Source adapted from IPAWORLD.org)

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Parents need support in recognizing the value of child-initiated play as a school readiness strategy.**
- **Parents must limit screen time and increase children's time to play with peers outside and inside.**
- **Teachers must incorporate long periods of uninterrupted time for children to direct their play.**
- **All children need regular access to nature-based settings.**

| THE BENEFITS OF DOING SOMETHING | THE COST OF DOING NOTHING |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Young children shine and develop ideally in playful, interactive environments rather than through educational settings that focus on rote instruction (Alford, 2024) ✓ 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 (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). ✓ A play-based environment that honors child-led activities by allowing children to take the lead in their learning, and play provides opportunities for asking questions, exploring topics of interest, and engaging in projects and activities about which they are passionate (Alford, 2024). ✓ 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 to cultivate their learning. Early childhood is a peak time for rapid brain development; 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 vital time (Clark & Marx, 2024). ✓ 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 (Clark & Marx, 2024). ✓ 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 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Despite rich evidentiary research data demonstrating play's critical role in young children's lives by supporting healthy development and learning, play is often erroneously characterized as frivolous (Alford, 2024). The global shift away from play has created scenarios replete with exceedingly anxious parents, teachers, and society participants 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 (Alford, 2024). ✓ 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 (Alford, 2024). ✓ 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 (Alford, 2024). ✓ Settings explicitly created for young children have drastically minimized play. This reality is due to a stronger focus on "academic achievement" in the younger years; a concerted effort at removing play from educational settings, focusing on early mathematics and literacy; an increase in academic testing for young children, increased accountability; state legislatures prescribing early childhood curricula; introducing skills once considered developmentally and cognitively appropriate for older children into the earlier years; compelling preschool |

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| <p>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 (Clark & Marx, 2024).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Early childhood care and education require social justice work to meet the needs of all young children. Seltzer and O'Brien (2022, pp. 181-189) argue that disrupting systemic racism in ECCEC 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." ✓ 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 (Clark & Marx, 2024). ✓ Risk is everywhere and in every situation. It is impossible to eliminate every risk for children. Risk is necessary, and its benefits far outweigh any drawbacks. When children grow up overly protected, their instinctual ability to assess and avoid actual hazards becomes compromised (Dargatz, 2024). ✓ Risky play in education is crucial to 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 (Dargatz, 2024). ✓ Every human or animal has a Circadian Rhythm. When teachers 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 (Pollock, 2024). ✓ Free play is the concept of child-directed, autonomous, open-ended play experiences that align with thinking that sees children as competent 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 with peers, resolve conflicts, negotiate, and share (Keeler, 2020; Marr, 2024). ✓ Natural spaces are therapeutically beneficial when the play environments foster risky, imaginative, and connection-based play (Marr, 2024). ✓ Nature-based play and interventions benefit individuals with physical, mental, emotional, or developmental disabilities (Coventry, 2021). ✓ 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 (Marr, 2024). ✓ 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 environmental interactions. ✓ 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 (Borowets, 2024). ✓ Children require unbridled access to art materials they can touch, smell, manipulate, influence, transform, build with, make marks with, and hold (Borowets, 2024). ✓ Engaging in self-directed exploration of art materials, children express their unique identities and cultivate autonomy, problem-solving abilities, and critical thinking skills (Borowets, 2024). | <p>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 (Alford, 2024).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Maslow's hierarchy of needs emphasizes safety and belonging as essential prerequisites for human flourishing. Delving 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 (Clark & Marx, 2024). ✓ 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 (Clark & Marx, 2024). ✓ 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 (Clark & Marx, 2024). ✓ 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. ✓ 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; Clark & Marx, 2024). ✓ Risk-taking is essential. Taking away children's ability to take risks by bubble-wrapping everything may 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 <i>safer</i> playgrounds because the element of risk has been taken away (Wood & Leichter-Saxby, 2018). 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 (Dargatz, 2024). ✓ When teachers or administrators impose a rigid daily schedule filled with teacher-directed transitions, extensive large group instruction, and limited time for children to choose what they are interested in, play with whom they want to play, and for as long as they choose to play, but instead have no choice in their play, children are robbed of the primary way that they grow and develop (Lawrence, 2024). ✓ 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.) (Marr, 2024). ✓ Equity considerations are needed for all children to have the opportunity to access nature spaces. Accessibility to nature settings must begin with addressing barriers: physical, social-emotional, financial, and geographic (Marr, 2024). ✓ 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 that a restricted curriculum and ho-hum classrooms negate the needs of young children, ignoring the potential of a material-rich environment and what it can offer for child development (Borowets, 2024). |
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IPA USA Vision, Mission, and Guiding Principles

Vision Statement:

A world where all children can play

Purpose/Mission Statement (from Bylaws):

IPA USA aims to protect, preserve, and promote the child's right to play.

What is Play?

Play is the work of childhood. Play is biologically driven. There are many types of play. The highest, purest form of play is spontaneous, freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, pleasurable, purposeless, and free from conflicts. For younger children, it also contains symbolism and elements of pretend.

Guiding Principles

- Play, along with the basic needs of nutrition, health, shelter, and education, is **vital for the development of all children from birth to 18 years**.
- Play is **integral and necessary** for social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development.
- Play **facilitates brain growth**, especially in the frontal cortex, where essential cognitive functions reside, including attention, self-regulation, working memory, and cognitive flexibility, all known as executive function.
- Many foundational skills can only be developed **through play** and thus justify the essential need for recess for younger children and breaks for older children.
- Play opportunities are **needed for children both indoors and outdoors**.
- Play needs differ **among the age groups**: birth to age 2, pre-k, early elementary, upper elementary, middle school, and high school.
- Schools, especially pre-K and elementary schools, **need help understanding** that young children learn best through play.
- Schools need help and support in providing meaningful and appropriate play opportunities, such as experiential, inquiry, integrated, and emergent approaches to curriculum.
- **Families need help** recognizing that play is necessary for healthy development, and that family play also bonds the family and helps build happy childhoods.
- **Community services and regulators**, such as parks and recreation, city planning, playground inspectors, and housing developments, need help understanding why opportunities for risky play should be included in their planning.
- All types of play are essential (e.g., physical play, such as running, climbing, swinging, etc.; block and construction play; play within art and music; games with rules; rough and tumble play; risky play; nature play; role-playing; etc.), but **child-directed, spontaneous play** is the most important type of play during the early years of birth through age eight.
- Children have the right to play as guaranteed by the 1989 [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

The IPA USA's 50th Anniversary White Paper is a comprehensive resource of 57 articles written by a group of dedicated authors to support advocacy efforts in addressing the child's right to play. To learn more about this topic or to review other topics in the IPA USA 50th Anniversary White Paper, please visit IPAUSA.org. Questions? Email ipausa2019user@gmail.com. IPA USA is here to support you in your work.