

POLICY BRIEF

READINESS IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK

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 develop 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

- Provide information to families on the importance of play and encourage them to lessen screen time.
- Incorporate child-initiated play into infant, toddler, preschool, kindergarten, primary, middle, and secondary grades.
- Provide learning environments that foster curiosity, discovery, and exploration through long periods, at least 1.5 hours morning and afternoon, in addition to outside play.
- Recognize the benefits of authentic assessment and eliminate standardized testing.
- Recognize how play builds the prerequisites of future learning.
- Provide policy briefs and research articles as evidence to school boards and superintendents that current practices in classrooms across America are not effective.

THE BENEFITS OF DOING SOMETHING	THE COST OF DOING NOTHING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ "How children approach learning is central to their chances for success in a school... These characteristics manifest themselves at a relatively early age, and children demonstrate diversity in their approaches and behaviors toward learning" National Center for Education Statistics, 2002. ✓ Eleanor D. Brown, 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. (Bredenkamp, 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). ✓ 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 teachers incorporate choice, children of all ages become lifelong learners and retain information at a much higher retention rate. Students enjoy what they are doing and learn more because they are more directly involved and empowered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 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 (Bernt-Santy, 2024). ✓ All domains of development, cognitive, physical, language, social, and emotional, are interdependent and interrelated. Focusing only on the cognitive domain harms all development (Lawrence, 2024). ✓ 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). ✓ 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 is not too hard to believe when the results of that learning are directly tied to how the teacher is evaluated and even retained (Dargatz, 2024; Peck, 2024). ✓ 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; 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; Woodward, 2024). ✓ The absence of dramatic play, child-led play, imaginative play, recess, and free play in classrooms added to the issue of

<p>by it. Student choice taps into multiple <u>learning styles</u> 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 (Dargatz, 2024; Peck, 2024).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Incorporating choice into learning includes the benefits of fostering intrinsic motivation and ownership of learning, promoting student agency and empowerment, increasing achievement, personalizing learning and cultural relevance, increasing the ability to make decisions and engage in self-regulation skills, and promoting autonomy (Peck, 2024). ✓ 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 (Lawrence, 2024). Research suggests this harms children's development and well-being, a concern that needs attention (Gray, 2011). ✓ 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 (Lawrence, 2024). 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.). ✓ 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 (Woodward, 2024). ✓ To be successful in the long term, children need Executive Functioning skills to control themselves and perform tasks well. The development of Executive Functioning includes <i>inhibitory control, working memory, cognitive flexibility, organizational skills, and emotional control</i>. (Han & Mykyta-Chomsky, 2024). ✓ 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. ✓ 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 (Stone, 2024). ✓ Authentic assessments often provide a deeper, more accurate, and valid measure than traditional tests while 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 	<p>teachers being under-trained in how to implement child-directed play in the classrooms, all interfere with the development of executive functioning skills (Hodges et al., 2022; Han & Mykyta-Chomsky, 2024).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Perry (2001) 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 (2001) 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 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. They may even impair healthy brain development by inducing excessive stress in the child (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007). ✓ 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 (Bernt-Santy, 2024). ✓ 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 (Lawrence, 2024). ✓ 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 (Stone, 2024). ✓ Attempts to standardize children 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 (Bernt-Santy, 2024). ✓ 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 (Lawrence, 2024). 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. ✓ Earliest is not best. Fastest is not best. "If what we want for our children is a lifetime of excellence—in experience, in ability, in knowledge—we must be responsible enough to wait and thorough enough to look at all sides of their development" (Bev
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<p>a process that is much more complex and interrelated than what can be easily scored (Eisner, 1979; Erickson, 2007; Stone, 2024).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 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 considered frivolous and replaced with testing preparation (Stone, 2024). ✓ 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 emphasize 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 optimize children’s learning and development (Moroney, 2024). The readiness equation has evolved into other variations with the same understanding, an example being: School Readiness = Ready Children + Ready Schools + Ready Families ✓ 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 their child’s learning, development, and well-being (Moroney, 2024). 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 (Moroney, 2024). 	<p>Bos). We need to pay attention to how we can help foster children’s engagement in learning so that they become lifelong learners.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Children’s brains have not changed; only the expectation about what children should be doing. These unrealistic expectations that ignore well-known and researched child development principles deleteriously impact children’s social competence and ability to become successful learners in academic settings. A holistic approach to the education of young children must be adopted and practiced, not just in preschool but up to third grade (at least) (Berke, 2016). ✓ Technology, such as Smart Boards, computers, iPads, tablets, and YouTube channels, are the primary teaching tools. A dependence on teaching concepts through screen time versus hands-on, active learning with materials harms overall development (Lawrence, 2024). ✓ School readiness does not mean “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 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 various ways in different parts of the world, and for this paper, the first year of formal schooling is referred to as Kindergarten. This original concept of school readiness emphasized specific academic skills and developmental milestones, often overlooking the individualized and holistic nature of child development, learning, and well-being, as well as fundamentals such as connection, belonging, safety, and inclusion (Moroney, 2024). ✓ 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, agentive child in the context of their unique transitions journey (Moroney, 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.