Play activities can enhance learning for young students with developmental delays.

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The Value of Play
In the past decade, school districts have designated an increasing number of elementary school campuses as facilities with early childhood special education (ECSE) classrooms. ECSE classrooms serve children ages 3-5 with developmental delays or disabilities. Although most elementary principals have experience as classroom teachers, as well as some familiarity with special education procedures, those experiences may not have provided the principal with an understanding of what goes on in ECSE preschool classrooms and why.

IN BRIEF
By understanding the benefits of play as a learning activity, principals can support teachers in their effort to maximize learning in classrooms serving children receiving special education services.
Some principals may question the educational veracity of the activities that occur in ECSE preschool classrooms because they are vastly different from those one would observe in early elementary general education. Indeed, it may appear that all that goes on within these classrooms is play. But play serves as an important learning activity for young children and provides a normalized setting in which all children can learn, grow, and develop. As Lev Vygotsky (1978) writes: “Play creates a zone of proximal development of the child. In play the child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself.”

Experts recognize that engaging in play with a friend is an important social activity for young children, with and without special needs, because it affords opportunities to increase social competence and develop important skills. Best practice in early childhood education dictates child-initiated, child-directed, teacher-supported play as the primary context and the major activity through which young children learn (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Educators recognize that the younger children are, the more informal the learning environment should be. Informal learning environments encourage spontaneous play that offers choices of activities, including various levels of play and constructions, to engage children’s interests. Early childhood educators associate play with important developmental and learning outcomes, including problem-solving, planning, conflict resolution and negotiation; establishing personal and social boundaries; and the release of tension, frustration, and aggression (Malone, 1999). But allowing children the opportunity to play is often not enough; some children with special needs do not readily engage in play. These children often need to develop play skills that enable them to make appropriate use of play materials; thus, teachers must develop strategies not only for using play as a context, but also for encouraging its occurrence. A responsive ECSE teacher knows that play is a rich opportunity for teaching cognitive, communicative, social, motor, adaptive, and preacademic skills.

**Making Room to Play**

In light of these benefits to children with special needs, when principals recognize play as an important developmental opportunity, they ensure that ECSE classrooms are set up to accommodate these best practice activities. An ideal early childhood classroom is organized into a variety of areas or centers, such as a block area, housekeeping or dramatic play area, sensory area (for sand or water exploration), art area, and a library and quiet toy area. Preschool-age children should also have access to outdoor play areas or a large, indoor play area for use during inclement weather. Structured play space helps children focus on specific learning skills; whereas open and unstructured play space encourages gross motor skills.

In organizing opportunities for children to play within the ECSE classroom, the teacher must be responsive to the developmental and preacademic needs of the children. Given that perspective, the teacher must ensure that there is purpose behind every play opportunity and that the goals of each child’s individualized education program (IEP) are being addressed. A straightforward yet effective procedure for determining the relevance of play activities to the child’s needs is the spidergram. As shown in Figure 1, ECSE teachers can use a spidergram to demonstrate how a simple play activity facilitates children’s learning across a variety of developmental domains and preacademic areas. This spidergram shows that within the block area children have opportunities to:

- Use cognitive skills by identifying block colors and shapes;
- Develop communication skills by requesting blocks or commenting about the block structure;
- Expand fine motor skills by stacking small blocks;
- Exercise gross motor skills by knocking over structures or kicking blocks;
- Increase self-help skills by cleaning up the block area;
- Apply social-emotional skills by sharing blocks or taking turns using desired items;
- Develop preliteracy skills by recognizing letters on blocks, arranging blocks into letters, and writing about the activity;

![Block Spidergram](https://www.naesp.org)
Practice prenumeracy skills by counting the blocks.

Teachers expand the effectiveness of the spidergram by indicating in which curricular area specific children may need support. Including children’s names on the spidergram can assist paraprofessionals and other early childhood team members in providing appropriate supports for children’s particular IEP goals. This strategy also guarantees that professionals encourage the children who need to work on their individual goals by engaging them in certain play activities.

**Getting the Most out of Play**

Most principals and ECSE teachers agree, however, that simply providing activity centers for play does not maximize learning. It is also important that the classroom structure includes adequate time for children with special needs to effectively learn through play. Children with special needs may take more time to engage in the play activity compared to children with typical development, due in part to unfamiliarity with play and uncertainty in how to engage in play. Providing extended play periods is essential for encouraging enhanced play development, which promotes the likelihood that children’s comfort level with the play activity will increase. Subsequently, children will return and expand upon the play activity, thus increasing their play skills as well as their skills across the developmental domains.

Regardless of the amount of time allotted for play, simply introducing the children to a new play activity or toy is not likely to promote the acquisition, maintenance, or generalization of novel, complex play skills. Children with developmental concerns may need direct intervention to learn how to play appropriately with toys or interact within novel play activity contexts. Teachers can intervene by means as simple as providing physical proximity, encouragement, shared attention, and verbal reinforcement. Children in the ECSE classroom may require play train-
interactional partner models skills just above the child’s current developmental level. These more advanced skills fall within the child’s zone of proximal development. When using peer supports, the teacher groups children who are more reticent with those children who have higher, more sophisticated play levels. These peer models encourage the struggling students by inviting them to participate, modeling play, and commenting on play activities within the zone of proximal development.

The teacher provides environmental support to children by altering the physical and social environment. Examples of physical environmental supports include placing footsteps on the floor to indicate flow patterns within the classroom and using pictures or symbols on containers so children can identify the contents. Social environmental supports may include providing a buddy to a child who may have difficulty transitioning from one play activity to another.

Some supports during play activities may not be immediately evident to onlookers without ECSE training; but the skillful teacher is very aware of the advantages such invisible supports provide. For example, in their planning ECSE teachers purposefully arrange events in an order that increases children’s success during the activity. These arrangements may be as simple as allowing children with higher skill proficiency to take the first turn in a play activity, thus providing a model for more reticent children. Other invisible supports include incorporating more difficult tasks within enticing play activities, such as including motions that promote gross motor skills in an exciting obstacle course or hiding small plastic toys in the sand table and encouraging the child to use tools such as a bucket or scoop to dig for the “treasure.”

**Simplify Play**

In addition to adaptations the ECSE teacher makes in the classroom to provide supports for children during play activities, it may be necessary to make some modifications to the play materials or to simplify play activities in order for children with disabilities to be successful. Principals sometimes see these modifications and question why they are being made. For example, teachers may place art paper on small tabletop easels so a child with limited mobility can sit rather than stand during creative activities, or secure a toy to the floor so a child with less strength can use both hands to manipulate the toy without knocking it over. When asked, the teacher will explain the purpose of such
When visiting the ECSE classroom, if it appears that the children are simply playing, principals should recognize that the teacher is employing these essential concepts:

- Play is an important way for children to learn and practice new behaviors;
- Play is a functional behavior that contributes to quality of life for the child;
- Play provides opportunities for children to spontaneously and creatively explore their environment, act out their thinking, and assume the roles and perspectives of others;
- Play is self-sustaining because it is satisfying; and
- Play is a rich opportunity for teaching cognitive, communicative, social, motor, and adaptive skills.

Beyond these educational benefits for children with disabilities, play is enjoyable. So instead of questioning the value of play in the classroom, maybe the principal should consider joining in the fun!

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References


WEB RESOURCES

Doris Bergen’s article, “The Role of Pretend Play in Children’s Cognitive Development,” can be found on the Early Childhood Research & Practice Web site. The Internet-only journal features articles related to the development, care, and education of children from birth to age 8.

http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n1/bergen.html

“Telling Stories with Blocks: Encouraging Language in the Block Center,” by Janie Heisner, discusses the impact that incorporating toys from the block center into shared storybook reading has on promoting sociodramatic play.

http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v7n2/heisner.html