

Through Play-Colored Glasses

Play is a powerful tool that promotes early childhood learning and development

BY GRACIE BRANCH

I'll never forget the excitement and trepidation I experienced upon entering my very first student teaching assignment at the University of Oklahoma Institute of Child Development. There, my knowledge of best practices in early childhood education would be realized while working with 2-, 3-, and 4-year-old students from a glass-partitioned observation booth.

In that setting, I learned how to pronounce "Piaget" correctly, that you can't use the same manipulatives for a 2-year-old that you use for a 4-year-old—because they place them in their mouths—and that there is nothing better than seeing young children actively engaged in learning through play.

A lot of that learning fell by the wayside as students distance-learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. While most children had more unstructured leisure time, educators can't be sure if it was spent in front of a screen—and it almost certainly wasn't spent enjoying games and physical activity with other children. This fall, educators must not

forget that this is another area of unfinished learning we'll have to address, especially among the youngest learners.

I believe that young children have the right to learn through play. Not only does play contain valuable social and practical lessons in itself, it also helps children expend some of their energy in preparation to absorb information from more traditional lessons, and it elevates their mood. There is so much power in play, and yet it seems there is a tendency for principals to feel that it can be justified only for the early grades. Why is it so hard to accept that play is OK in an early childhood classroom?





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WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT PLAY

Meaningful principal leadership in early childhood requires significant expertise in child development and instructional practices that support young learners, according to NAESP's 2021 "Leading Learning Communities: A Principal's Guide to Early Learning and the Early Grades (Pre-K–3rd Grade)."

Learning and development for young children occurs rapidly and cumulatively, continuously laying the foundation for later learning, says a 2015 study from the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. Preschool and early elementary students are experiential learners—they learn by doing rather than figuring things out only by thinking about them. This means that shared, play-based activities with educators and peers are especially effective opportunities for learning.

According to *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8*, young children learn best when the following three factors are present:

1. They are actively engaged through questioning and information gathering;
2. Domains of learning are integrated and combined with hands-on experiences; and
3. Curiosity and play are prioritized with direct social interactions.

Core Concepts: Development

Active learning and knowledge acquisition occur during play with materials, ideas, and other people. Without this understanding, many principals might hold inappropriate expectations of early childhood students, urging teachers to instruct in ways that do not successfully support children's learning and development.

"The Power of Play," a report released in 2018 for pediatricians, provides further evidence of the immense benefits of play. While the report delineates a pediatric role in enhancing development in young children, it provides conclusive research about how play benefits learning, peer engagement, physical growth, and health. In addition, the report offers advice on integrating play into early childhood programs and why early childhood educators might be more eager to include play in young children's experiences due to its cognitive, social, and emotional benefits.

Developmentally appropriate play with parents and peers promotes the social-emotional, cognitive, language, and self-regulation skills that build executive function and a prosocial brain, "The Power of Play" says. In addition, play is instrumental in supporting the formation of relationships that are nurturing, safe, and stable.

Many policymakers and educators might think of play as inconsequential, but that is not the case. Play enhances brain structure and promotes executive function, allowing individuals to pursue goals and ignore distractions. In the instance of childhood adversity, play becomes even more integral to a child's healthy development. When play and nurturing, safe, and stable relationships are missing in a child's life, toxic stress can disrupt the development of executive function and the learning of prosocial behaviors.

The mutual joy, shared communication, and light-heartedness that parents and children can experience during play are strong regulators of the body's stress response system, the report says. And beyond COVID, when early childhood programs might be under pressure to add more instructional components and reduce play to address learning gaps, principals should focus on a balanced curriculum that includes playful learning to promote healthy child development.

- **Learning and development for young children occurs rapidly, is experiential, and lays the foundation for later learning.**
- **Play has multiple benefits in promoting learning, peer engagement, physical growth and health, and executive function.**
- **A play-based learning environment features warm and welcoming classroom spaces that promote diverse learning experiences.**

WHAT LEARNING AS PLAY LOOKS LIKE

An engaging, play-based learning environment begins with a school atmosphere and classroom spaces that are warm and welcoming, organized to promote diverse learning experiences for young children and focused on celebrating students' varied cultural backgrounds. Furniture, equipment, and learning materials should provide rich, engaging, and multisensory learning opportunities for young learners.

The arrangement of the furniture and materials must maximize small-group interactions, student collaboration, problem-solving, creative play, and physical movement within the classroom—in other words, tables, not desks. A well-balanced early childhood classroom features imagination corners, block areas, and reading nooks; a diverse classroom library; safe or quiet spaces; and activity centers that emphasize the arts.

Children are naturally motivated to play. In a play-based framework, children can explore, experiment, discover, and solve problems in imaginative and playful ways. They can also expand their executive function skills by practicing information retention—remembering where the ladybug is in a memory cards game, how to collect the most sets of four in Go Fish, and what color card they need next in UNO, for example.

Games typically involve strategy: Children have an opportunity to make plans and adjust those plans in response to what happens during game play. In addition, game playing engages other critical executive function skills such as inhibition control, cognitive flexibility, and

working memory. Think checkers, tic-tac-toe, or hide-and-seek; these games prompt children to develop a plan and adjust accordingly in response to the other player.

Principals can encourage teachers to provide a multitude of opportunities for students to build their executive function skills through meaningful social interactions and fun games—including activities such as Simon Says and I Spy.

The Harvard University Center on the Developing Child offers educators an array of great ideas for engaging children of different ages through play. In addition to classroom games, students can explore spatial relationships and build important motor capabilities through play.

A well-equipped, play-based classroom can supply children with exactly what they need to experience success and thrive in school. When early childhood educators provide a wealth of whole-body sensory experiences and hands-on experiences to children on a daily basis, early childhood classrooms can develop strong bodies and minds.

PLAY IN A PANDEMIC

Educators will need to make a few adjustments to early childhood play in a socially distanced setting. Here are a few best practices adapted from the Council of Chief State School Officers' 2020 "Restart & Recovery" report.

- **Continue to encourage play in activity centers**, but reduce the number of students at each center to comply with social distancing guidelines when necessary. Offer limited materials so that clean substitutes are always available, and place manipulatives in individual baggies or tubs so each student has his or her own materials.
- **Introduce and practice the routine of having students wash their hands for 20 seconds** or use sanitizer after entering the classroom, before rotating to their next station/center, before snacks, and before/after lunch.
- **Use visual cues such as tape, hula hoops, or seat mats to help students self-distance** at tables, on the floor, or at an activity center. Decrease the number of chairs at round tables, but be sure to balance this reduced workspace with plenty of centers to provide additional areas of learning.
- **Go outside as much as possible.** It's a great time to use that outdoor classroom or garden for read-alouds and "shaking the sillies out" through gross-motor activities.

As early childhood educators, we must strive to provide classrooms and experiences in which students can learn their best.

Be mindful about removing young students from the classroom for extended periods. Instead, use formative assessment strategies such as observations, anecdotal records/notes, photos, and videos to measure and record student performance information in the classroom when possible.

Keep in mind that children in quarantine—especially those in our most vulnerable populations—might experience a lack of play that can be a contributing factor in what and how much they learn. As early childhood educators, we must strive to provide classrooms and experiences in which students can learn their best.

CHOOSE YOUR LENS

We have all heard the phrase "looking through rose-colored glasses" to highlight the tendency to see things in an overly optimistic and often unrealistic way. It is important for principals and early childhood educators to be cognizant of the fact that our beliefs and values play a role in our thinking in the following areas:

- The type of educational environment we foster;
- The way our experiences and culture help shape how we think about play; and
- The way we do—or do not—nurture play as a part of our school culture and classroom settings.

In choosing your play lens, ask yourself: Do you see play as belonging only on the playground and in physical education classes, or as an essential component in children's learning? The answer to this question will influence the choices that you make for your school, impacting your vision; your beliefs about teaching and learning; whether or not you designate areas for play; how children interact and communicate; and the materials, resources, manipulatives, and choices you make available to students.

Hopefully, you'll decide that play is more than just OK; it is to be promoted and celebrated as a powerful developmental tool. As Jean Piaget said, "Play is the answer to how anything new comes about." ●

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