

Applying It: Incorporating Play to Support Learning and Early Childhood Development

Center for Early Education
and Development

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This tip sheet will discuss how to promote play experiences that support children's development.

RECALL IT

The ***Introducing It: The Importance of Play in Early Childhood*** tip sheet introduces the following concepts:

- Children naturally spend much of their time playing.
- There are many different types of play that may occur across childhood, each supporting unique aspects of motor, cognitive, and social development.

“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.”

-Kenneth R. Ginsburg¹

SETTING UP THE ENVIRONMENT

Imagine you want to help your kindergartener practice basic addition. You might consider a worksheet or flashcards but worry that your child would resist or find them boring. Instead, you play restaurant, helping your child make a menu with prices. Your child gets to take your order, tell you how much you owe, and count your money to make sure you paid the correct amount. We can help set up opportunities like these for all kinds of situations.

Play should mainly be child-led,² but adults can intentionally set up an environment where children can practice skills.

Things to consider when setting up play environments:

- Include play materials that promote a variety of gross motor and fine motor movements (“gross motor” means whole-body movements, like running or climbing; “fine motor” means small hand movements such as using a screwdriver or coloring).
- Provide play materials that connect to books you’ve read together or science concepts you’ve discussed so that children can practice vocabulary they’ve learned.
- Provide writing materials appropriate to play (like a menu or a pad of paper to take orders when setting up a restaurant). This gives children chances to include early writing practice in their play.
- If a child wants to include you in their play, let them take the “adult” or “leader” role, and follow along with their ideas.
- Offer to pretend around specific anxieties or conflicts that a child may have.

Things to consider when incorporating more play into a child's day:

- How can I set up my environment in a way that encourages sustained play?

Do children have enough time to play?

Is there enough physical space to play?

Can I match the available toys to themes or concepts they are learning about?

- What is my role in the play?

Am I letting the child lead, or am I imposing my own ideas?

Can I ask questions that give the child ideas to elaborate on what they are playing?

If the child involves me in pretend play, what role do they want each of us to play?

What are they practicing by adopting these roles?

Am I observant and curious about what children are expressing through their play?

PLAY AT VARIOUS STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

Supporting Play with **INFANTS**:

Infants love to explore new materials. Rotate the toys available and allow infants to explore objects such as plastic bowls and spoons or different fabrics. Focus on the sensory experiences of sounds and textures. Spend time playing in different rooms and outside!

Supporting Play with **TODDLERS**:

Support their emerging ability to play pretend. You can have toys talk to them or make general suggestions for pretend play to get them started. ("Let's pretend we're going to the zoo!") Then let them lead the play. Provide materials that strengthen fine motor skills such as clay or toy tools. Provide time for outdoor and gross motor play.

Supporting Play with **PRESCHOOLERS**:

Provide materials that deepen pretend play. Help them plan out what they might use while playing. If they are pretending to give a haircut, provide a spray bottle with real water and a comb.

If they are playing doctor, simple materials such as cotton balls or Q-tips can be useful. Help children assign specific characters, and ask questions that advance a storyline with a beginning, middle, and end. ("What will happen to the monkey next? How will he get home safely?") Support reenacting stories that children have seen in books or on TV. Use pretend play to practice things that children might be nervous about, such as starting swimming lessons or going to school.

PLAY SUPPORTS CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

Play can be an important tool for supporting children's mental health. Watching and listening to children while they play can provide a lot of insight into their thoughts and feelings about their world and what they are working on mastering. For example, children often have a hard time reporting on what they did at school on a given day, but by playing school with them, you can learn a lot about their routines, their interactions with teachers, and what they see as the challenges at school.

Pretend play specifically can help children master anxieties or conflicts.³ By role-playing and practicing certain situations and routines, children can gain familiarity and comfort with different settings. Some examples of this:

- A two-year-old who is struggling with bedtime may put a dolly to bed over and over, saying goodnight and leaving the room to naturally practice that separation.
- A three-year-old with a new baby in the family may pretend to be pregnant and go to the hospital. This can give them a sense of control over the situation as they tell their own parent, "We don't know when the baby is coming, and I might be gone for a long time."

- A four-year-old who is anxious about getting shots at the doctor may feel calmer and more prepared for the experience after a pretend doctor visit with their dad where they walk through what is likely to happen. They may also want to pretend to be their dad's doctor when they get home.
- A five-year-old who is getting used to kindergarten may assign their siblings roles as their new friends and "practice" playing with them at home.

- Outdoor play provides important opportunities for gross motor play and constructive play, and it provides a variety of materials for sensory and pretend play, like sand, water, and dirt.

Support routines around wearing the appropriate gear (for example, paint shirts) and cleaning up when done so that play can make messes but children can help return order to the space.

TIPS AND TRICKS: WHAT ADULTS NEED TO KEEP IN MIND

- Free play is not a waste of time or even a break from learning. Children are constantly practicing motor, cognitive, and social emotional skills while they play.
- Provide opportunities for children to play in a variety of different ways across the day. See our companion tip sheet, ***Introducing It: The Importance of Play in Early Childhood*** for more on different types of play.
- Not all time needs to be structured. Provide ample time for children to choose their own play.

Don't underestimate the importance of open-ended play materials (e.g., containers, fabric, "loose parts" such as pom poms or sticks). Play materials do not need to be toy representations of objects, such as a play kitchen or toy toolbox. Children will come up with their own ideas when given the chance to use their imagination.

DIVING INTO IT

For additional information on this topic,

Head Start's Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center has research and resources on the importance of play:

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/curriculum/article/importance-play-early-childhood>

The Minnesota Children's Museum offers resources on play:

mcm.org/playful-parenting

PBS Kids has ideas for play, games, and crafts:

pbs.org/parents

Please visit CEED's website:

<http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

REFERENCES

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3. *How play strengthens your child's mental health*. UNICEF Parenting. (n.d.). <https://www.unicef.org/parenting/child-development/how-play-strengthens-your-childs-mental-health>