

# PLAY

## Understanding the Value of Play from Birth Through 3rd Grade:

Supporting a Strong Foundation for the New York State Learning Standards



### Guidance from

New York State Head Start Collaboration Office

New York State Association for the Education  
of Young Children

New York State Education Department



Play

### **Playful, Joyful Learning**

As states across the country develop research-based guidelines and standards for development and learning, educators and parents feel increasing responsibility to ensure children are prepared to meet high academic expectations. As a result, time for play and playful learning is often cut from the daily classroom schedule in favor of more educator-directed and narrowly scripted instructional approaches.

The purpose of this brief is to help educators, administrators, and practitioners:

- 1) understand the value of play in children's healthy development and learning; and
- 2) develop the use of play as one of many appropriate teaching tools to help children work toward learning goals and meet developmental expectations.

#### **Why Play?**

- Children from birth through age 8 learn best when they are engaged in active play-based learning within social and experiential contexts.
- Play is a vehicle for learning and social development.
- Play allows children to make connections between the physical world and abstract concepts. Playful learning experiences function as a modality for children to learn, practice, and master skills.
- Play is a zone of proximal development where adults can support the social development and learning of individual children.
- Playful learning can be a powerful instructional tool for educators to foster 21st century skills and to guide students toward individualized development and learning goals.

## The Importance of Play and the Connection to Later School Success

Play is an important component of early childhood that supports children's healthy growth and development, particularly during the sensitive learning period between birth and age eight. Often described as children's work, it is the primary vehicle for discovery, creativity, joy, and practice. Children have an inclination to play, and the role of play in providing a foundation for cognitive skill development, building children's sense of belonging, and working through complex social and emotional scenarios has been studied extensively (e.g., Miller, 2009, Gray, 2011, Gilliam, 2006, & Singer, 2012). During play, children's brains are actively seeking and using skills such as negotiating, improvising, communicating, critical thinking, problem-solving, taking risks, sharing ideas, perspective-taking, creating, and learning from mistakes. The value of play for these reasons has sparked a renewed emphasis on its importance in all early childhood settings, including the early elementary grades.

As schools grapple with instructional shifts to support 21st century skills, the American Academy of Pediatrics recently released a clinical report supporting play as a vehicle to attain such skills, stating that, "Play is fundamentally important for learning 21st century skills, such as problem solving, collaboration, and creativity, which require the executive functioning skills that are critical for adult success". The challenge for many programs and schools is to either move away from or augment didactic, educator-directed instructional approaches by adopting schedules and instructional modalities that better support those skills (Miller and Almon, 2009).

Though the importance of play is understood by many parents and educators, the nature of and opportunities for play have shifted significantly over the last two decades. The convergence of technology-based toys and games, highly scheduled and fast-paced family lifestyles, narrowly focused curriculum, increased adult-structured activities, perceived risk of play environments, and limited access to play spaces have contributed to reducing children's opportunities for the types of play that foster 21st century skills and support their acquisition of healthy social and emotional skills (Singer, 2012). This lack of play seems to be having lasting negative consequences, including rising rates of anxiety, depression, and problems of attention and self-control (Gray, 2011, Miller and Almon, 2009). For these reasons, it is more important than ever for parents and educators to rethink how play can serve as a powerful teaching tool across the birth-through- age-eight learning continuum. Play is essential for healthy development and academic success.

Although outdoor play is commonly viewed as a respite from indoor instruction, research continues to reveal that intentional, well-designed outdoor play can greatly contribute to children's learning and development, including language development. Cognitively, children are exposed to new concepts and vocabulary outside. Socially and emotionally, children are more likely to use their imaginations and build self-confidence as they actively play and interact with nature. Not only can they get exercise, they can move freely while learning and interacting with the environment.<sup>2</sup>

PLAY



## Stages of Play

As children grow, they follow a general sequence of developmental, social play. While all stages of play involve exploring, problem-solving and having fun, children develop social and cognitive skills with increasing levels of sophistication as they move through the stages. Typically developing children assess the risk and their comfort level with a task and

make the effort to try the next level of skill, whether it's guessing at a new word or reaching for the next rung of a climbing apparatus. Play helps children learn how to take calculated risks; to figure out what they can do safely to get them to the next step.

Knowing the social stages of play between birth to age eight and

beyond can help adults understand how very young children interact with and explore the world, while also providing clues about how to better support a child's social development, particularly as more attention is paid to social and emotional learning. The list below defines each stage and highlights how play changes as children grow and develop.

Approximate Age	Stage of Play	Examples of Play in Action
<b>Birth - 3 months</b>	Unoccupied Play	Moves and discovers body parts and explores how to control movement; discovers and responds to how others react to the movements and sounds they make.
<b>Birth - 2 years</b>	Solitary Play	Plays alone and does not typically interact with other children. Enjoys playing by themselves with things such as stacking cups, push-and-pull toys, or simple puzzles. During this stage, they are building skills for working independently and may talk about what they are doing. Children often return to solitary play throughout childhood, which is important to healthy development.
<b>Birth +</b>	Onlooker Play	Notifies what other children are playing; starts by watching others but then may mimic the play during or after watching another child. May engage by asking questions but makes no effort to join in play.
<b>2 ½ years - 3 ½ years</b>	Parallel Play	Starts to play next to another child but may not talk to or interact in meaningful ways. Play might include role-playing, dress-up, and pretending.
<b>3 years - 4 ½ years</b>	Associative Play	Interacts with other children through conversation or sharing materials but may follow own storyline. May converse with another child about what they are doing (e.g., "I'm driving my car up the ramp") but may not engage socially or cooperatively in play with other child.
<b>4 - 8 years +</b>	Social and Cooperative Play	Plays with other children in meaningful ways. Engages in play scenarios where everyone is following the same storyline. May assign play roles, come up with story ideas, take turns, and negotiate. Engages in cooperative and competitive games with rules.



# Types of Play

Play can be classified by the types of activities in which children engage. Types of play usually cross over multiple stages of play, and all types support children's social and

emotional development and learning across domains with varying degrees of emphasis.

The chart below describes the different types of play and highlights

different skill areas that can be supported through each specific type of play.

Type of Play	Examples	Development and Learning Highlights
<b>Functional or sensorimotor</b>	Very young infants play with simple objects by grasping, banging, dropping, mouthing and exploring. Older infants, toddlers, and young children start to understand the purpose of toys or objects and use them to operate according to function (e.g., rolling a ball, putting a doll to bed). Children begin to learn cause and effect (e.g., when the child bangs a block it makes a loud sound).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fine and large motor skills</li> <li>• Coordination</li> <li>• Exploration, discovery, and curiosity</li> <li>• Problem-solving and persistence</li> <li>• Communicating</li> <li>• Representing</li> </ul>
<b>Sociodramatic, imaginative or pretend</b>	This type of play is most prevalent in children from ages 2 through 7 and older and includes playing out scenarios with social roles, using figurines as characters, and using symbolism to represent items. This type of play can be done independently or as a group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approaches to learning</li> <li>• Presenting ideas</li> <li>• Collaboration, cooperation, and negotiation</li> <li>• Divergent-thinking and creativity</li> <li>• Self-regulation</li> <li>• Conflict resolution</li> </ul>
<b>Constructive</b>	Playing and building with objects to construct something, sometimes with a goal in mind. This can be done either independently or with a group. This type of play is prevalent in children from ages 2 through 8+.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fine motor skills</li> <li>• Independent thinking</li> <li>• Problem solving</li> <li>• Engineering and mathematical thinking</li> <li>• Language, communication, and presenting ideas</li> </ul>
<b>Games with Rules</b>	This type of play is prevalent in children late 4 through 8+ and includes formal games with set rules (e.g., board games, organized sports) and made-up games with rules. Initially, it is common for children to focus almost exclusively on the rules -- creating them, negotiating them, and focusing on who is not following them -- before they start to enjoy playing the games. Exploring the power that rule-making provides is intriguing and important to young children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conflict resolution</li> <li>• Self-regulation and impulse control</li> <li>• Negotiation</li> <li>• Language and communication</li> </ul>

# Using Play to Strengthen Interactions with Children From Birth through Three Years Old

Play and interactions with caring adults and the environment are primary methods of learning for infants, toddlers, and three-year-old children. Educators support infants and toddlers by providing experiences that are consistent with developmentally appropriate practices, grounded in relationship-building and focused on rich learning opportunities, which include language development and social emotional experiences.

Relationship-building between the child and educator is an important aspect of play. If a child does not feel safe in their environment or with their educator, they are less likely to engage, explore, and play. Educators can build these meaningful relationships by identifying and meeting the child's individual needs, creating a welcoming environment for both families and children, and incorporating language into everyday activities. This may include singing songs while diaper changing, getting down to eyelevel when communicating with the child, or even acknowledging children by using their name often and providing specific feedback.

One-on-one interactions with an educator provide the advantage of identifying the developmental range of skills and unique interests of infants, toddlers, and three-year-old children. Play activities and materials should be open-ended, child-directed, and available for an extended period of time. At a young age, this may be handing a toy back and forth or turning a page in a book. Young children are naturally inquisitive and will explore independently. Educators can enhance children's natural curiosity by setting up an environment with materials that can be used in different ways, such as bowls, spoons, dough, and realistic dress-up clothes. These materials and learning centers should be rotated or added to, always considering what the children are playing with and their interests.

Educators can engage infants in language development and cognitive learning by naming the items they are playing with or pointing to. With toddlers and three-year-old children, adults should more concretely incorporate time to TALK (Tell a child what I notice or wonder; Ask a child what she notices or wonders; Listen to children's ideas and questions; and Keep the conversation going).

This back-and-forth talk during play helps build vocabulary and provides context for different types of words, like action and directional words. Toddlers and three-year-old children are quickly learning about the world around them, through exploration, and experiencing strong feelings. Educators can help support children by helping to identify and validate their feelings, strengthening the adult-child relationship. Educators can also help navigate and negotiate transitions through playful interactions that allow toddlers and three-year-old children to act out scenarios and express themselves.

## Examples of play in action in birth through three-year-old settings:

- Children in an infant classroom explore a board book by holding it, looking at the pictures (right side up and upside down), and trying to turn the pages. The educator encourages the child to look at the book by sitting next to the child, pointing to and naming different objects in the book, following the infant's gaze to objects on the page and talking about them. The educator allows the child to play with the book for as long as it holds the child's interest. The educator may read parts of the story but may not complete it before the infant moves along to another play item. The infant may revisit the book throughout the day, and not start at the beginning but on a page that catches their interest.



- Children splash and pour water from one container to another in a toddler classroom. The educator encourages the children to see how much one container holds compared to another one and allows the children to splash and try to pick up the water using with various materials, such as measuring cups, regular cups, a funnel, or a bowl. To encourage language, the educator asks open-ended questions such as, "I wonder what would happen if..." and "what do you think will happen when..."
- In a class for three-year-olds, a small group of children is playing in the dramatic play center, where they are taking care of pretend animals and taking on different roles, such as putting them to bed, waking them up, pretend-reading to them, having them talk to each other, and feeding them. The educators engage in a dialogue about how their stuffed animals may be feeling, what their names are, and their likes and dislikes. The educator, as per the child's suggestions, gradually adds pretend animals, empty boxes, pretend food, books, and other props to encourage play with the animals as part of a living things theme. The educator and assistant move around the room to observe, join in play when invited, and to encourage children who need extra support.

# Strengthening Playful Learning in Prekindergarten through 3rd Grade (P-3)

The goal in early childhood education settings, including schools, should be to build capacity by strengthening cognitive and social development through intentional play experiences.

Intentional play experiences provide opportunities for children to learn and practice important skills. Playful learning includes choice, exploration, and engagement. When folded into instruction and the daily schedule, children are given opportunities to:

- Engage in hands-on experiences with materials.
- Develop intrinsic skills in all the domains of learning, which include cognitive, physical-motor, communication and language, and social and emotional development.
- Think symbolically while connecting ideas, feelings, and facts to build new understanding.
- Construct their own knowledge and deepen previous knowledge through direct experiences.
- Set goals, develop and share ideas, make rules, negotiate challenges, and choose how long to play.
- Explore, create, pretend, imagine, and learn from trial and error.
- Talk, debate, and express.

## Play as an Instructional Strategy

Educators and leaders should consider and observe play opportunities to find out what type of play is occurring throughout the day. The goal should be to build in ample time for children to engage in several types of play that are open-ended, encourage exploration, spark imagination, encourage risk-taking, and provide opportunities to interact freely with peers. Providing enough time and an environment that encourages play that involves make-believe, symbolism, role-playing, and having and sharing ideas can lead to greater learning gains. This requires a careful look, not only at the time in the schedule, but the materials, resources and space available for children to get the most out of play opportunities.

Intentional play requires educators to plan and guide playful learning activities that are hands-on and

experiential in nature, linked to a concept, unit or theme, and focused on the process of learning; that support meaningful interactions among students and educators, and that lead to specific development and learning goals.

Educators can build more choice, exploration, and engagement into their teaching practice while working toward learning goals. Intentional play can be part of the instructional cycle when it is used as a method of delivering curricular content with careful attention to the sequence of learning and intended learning goals.

Adults may engage in various ways, such as helping children come up with a play idea, setting up the environment, engaging reluctant children, or playing a “role”, but children are in charge of how the play unfolds. Learning and social development during this type of play is spontaneous and grounded in the concepts of choice and freedom.

By intentionally planning and guiding playful learning, teachers have an opportunity to set up learning experiences that build 21st century skills, such as:

- Collaboration through team-based, project-based activities.
- Emphasizing conceptual reasoning skills and background knowledge across subject areas.
- Emphasizing oral and written communications meant to convey knowledge and reasoning to others.
- Emphasizing activities that focus on solving unstructured problems.

The following snapshots illustrate how intentional play can be used to aid content learning, support academic language production, and build 21st century skills:

- A prekindergarten class for four-year-olds is working on a unit of study on oceans. In the blocks and building area, the educator has displayed pictures of various sandcastles, collected a sampling of texts with pictures of sandcastles, and created a picture book with vocabulary words and labeled pictures of sandcastles, beach toys, and building tools.

Students are engaged in planning for block play by using a clipboard, different colored pencils, shape templates and rulers. The educator asks questions about what types of shapes will be used in their castle design and what may need to be added to the block area to improve their structures. Students create their structure plan for building by using the picture book and displays as inspiration. As students move from planning to the building stage, the educator introduces shells and other ocean items that may be added to the decoration of their block building. The educator continues to ask questions about size, shape, and creative choices during building, encouraging dialogue about the students' plan, design and implementation.

- A kindergarten class has been learning about living things and building vocabulary for two weeks through book explorations, nature walks, a classroom collection of nature materials and a visit to a local nature rehabilitation center. Children have been constructing habitats and housing using cardboard boxes and other materials in different centers throughout the classroom. Groups of children are playing with the habitats they made with different figurines and other representative objects. The educator moves around the room to observe and support play and to focus on children who need extra support. The educator uses this time as an opportunity to playfully engage with children to work on individual learning goals.
- A 1st grade educator sets up an area in the corner of his classroom specifically for a whole class project to build, over several weeks, a rocket ship and a large-scale model of the Sun, Earth and moon, using boxes of various shapes and sizes. The area is used as a temporary instructional learning center, where the educator works with smaller groups of children on specific concepts, as well as a space play station where students take on different roles, imagine scenarios, build, and create. The educator gives teams of children challenges and experiments to conduct in the





play station and around the room, in which they have to assign roles and tackle problems. As children come up with new ideas to enhance play, the educator supports their ideas. During intentional play, the educator is assessing individual student progress toward learning goals through observation. After play, the educator reviews what happened and what they learned by asking questions and recording answers for the whole class to see. The educator highlights what happened and asks open-ended questions about what they might do differently next time.

■ A 2nd grade educator is teaching a unit about different types of communities, natural resources and how people live. The unit's over-arching question is "in what ways does where we live influence how we live?" The class has been researching and collecting information about different communities by using multiple texts, discussing what they've learned in small groups, charting information as a whole class and comparing it to their own community. Children have interviewed family members, documented their research and added information to the class chart. Now the educator has split the children up into three groups and provided each group with a challenge to develop a skit that is unique to a specific community. Students are encouraged to use humor in their skit, but they also must work together to write a script, negotiate roles, and use information from research about their challenge. After all of the skits are presented, the class talks about what they saw, what they remember from their prior research, and how each community might tackle the portrayed problem.

In the examples above, the educators intentionally planned playful learning experiences for children, ensuring their activities were:

- Hands-on and open-ended
- Promoting freedom to talk and express ideas
- Meaningful to learners
- Connected to specific learning goals
- Providing multiple ways to represent ideas and learning

## Strategies to Strengthen Play

### Strategies for P-3 Teachers

- Set up the learning environment into distinct learning centers/stations.
- Change the learning centers/stations to reflect the current topic of study.
- Plan activities that encourage participation and maximize children's interests and skills.
- Use many modalities of instruction, including visual, oral, and kinesthetic (movement activities).
- Evaluate the curriculum and schedule to infuse intentional play experiences.
- Elevate children's leaning by joining in play; and follow their lead!
- Rotate and provide materials that will support children in their play ideas and project-based explorations.
- Engage in conversations that deepen children's understanding of content knowledge.
- Ask open-ended questions.

### Strategies for P-3 Leaders

- Give permission for teachers to integrate play opportunities that support instruction throughout the day/week.
- Provide professional learning experiences for teachers to support them in implementing play as an instructional strategy.
- Inform families about the use and purpose of intentional play in early childhood learning environments.
- Provide time and collaborative opportunities for thoughtful planning and reflection.
- Provide age-appropriate materials and resources for utilizing play as an instructional strategy.
- Engage with and/or observe children in play experiences.



## Conclusion

There is little doubt that play is at the core of development and learning. As early learning guidelines and learning standards articulate a learning progression for all students, the challenge is for all who work with young children to provide intentional, experiential, and joyful learning

experiences that harness the power of play as a vehicle to deliver curriculum. Educators can create standards-based, authentic learning opportunities, using play to help children build knowledge, practice, experiment, and apply new understanding.

Understanding the multiple roles of play and what it takes to create opportunities for the types of play that cultivate 21st century skills is one step toward closing the door on the idea that playful learning is at odds with supporting students to meet rigorous learning standards.



## Acknowledgements

This publication was developed through a partnership with the New York State Education Department's Office of Early Learning, New York State Council on Children and Families, and the New York State Early Childhood Advisory Council



## Support provided by the Northeast Comprehensive Center



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## Resources

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.teachpreschool.org/2009/10/preschoolers-should-go-outside-everyday/>







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*Supported by Grant Number 90TP001901-01 from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Child Care, the Administration for Children and Families or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*