

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





FLAX



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
Birth - 3 months	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.
Birth – 2 years	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.
Birth +	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.
2 ½ years - 3 ½ years	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.
3 years – 4 ½ years	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.
4 - 8 years +	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
Functional or sensorimotor	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"> • Fine and large motor skills • Coordination • Exploration, discovery, and curiosity • Problem-solving and persistence • Communicating • Representing
Sociodramatic, imaginative or pretend	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"> • Approaches to learning • Presenting ideas • Collaboration, cooperation, and negotiation • Divergent-thinking and creativity • Self-regulation • Conflict resolution
Constructive	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"> • Fine motor skills • Independent thinking • Problem solving • Engineering and mathematical thinking • Language, communication, and presenting ideas
Games with Rules	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"> • Conflict resolution • Self-regulation and impulse control • Negotiation • Language and communication

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.

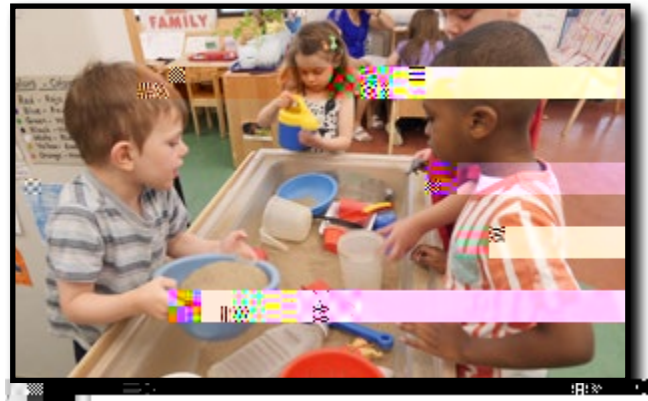
One-on-one interactions with an educator provide the advantage of identifying the developmental range of skills and unique interests of infants, toddlers, and three-year-old children. Play activities and materials should be open-ended, child-directed, and available for an extended period of time. At 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 I notice 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 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-

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 structure. 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 structure.

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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 learning 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 conversational (social) play with children. ”

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