

# Play, It's the Way Young

## Children Learn *for anyone who provides care for young children*

Play is children's natural language and the most important context in which they learn, experiment with new ideas, and develop understandings about the world. Through play, young children build the skills they need for critical thinking, collaboration, and leadership. Play is how children learn to solve problems, feel good about themselves, and build positive relationships with peers and adults. Play is not a break from learning—**play is the way young children learn.**

### Play Promotes Healthy Development and School Success in Many Ways

#### When children play, they learn:

**Thinking skills.** When an infant plays peekaboo and a preschooler pretends a block is a cell phone, they are learning to imagine and use symbolic thinking.

**Physical skills.** When preschoolers hop off the ground with both feet or pedal a tricycle, they are developing muscle strength, coordination, and balance. When kindergartners march and dance across the room, they are learning rhythm, which is necessary for reading fluency.

**Language skills.** Through playful sharing of rhymes, songs, stories, and conversation, children learn language and the foundations for reading and writing. We see it when an infant exchanges coos and babbles with a caregiver or a preschooler learns English by singing a favorite song.

**Social and emotional skills.** As children play together, they learn to communicate, negotiate, listen and empathize, work through problems, take turns, share, cooperate, compete, stand up for their ideas, take risks, handle frustration, and work through fears. We see these skills in action when a toddler holds a bucket while another child fills it with sand or a kindergartner says, "That makes me feel angry" instead of hitting a peer who grabbed his toy.



**Mathematical and scientific reasoning.** When infants use a baby sign to say "more" banana slices, toddlers match differently sized bowls with lids, preschoolers sort buttons into groups by color, or kindergartners count the number of cups they need for a "tea party," they are learning important mathematical and scientific reasoning skills.

**Positive associations with learning.** When toddlers choose a favorite book to read or preschoolers decide to explore insects in a class garden, they are learning to trust in their ideas, which increases their confidence. When children engage in activities they have chosen, learning is enjoyable because it's based on their own interests.

## Children's play is best understood as representing different points along a continuum.



**Child self-directed play.** Children have the freedom to direct every aspect of their play based on their interests and internal motivation—preschool children use wooden blocks to build structures based on their own ideas. *Young children need **many** opportunities to engage in self-determined play.*

**Adult-child collaborative play.** Children initiate and direct their play. Adults build from the children's ideas

to expand and extend their play—a child pretends to make cookies and an adult offers a cardboard box to use as an oven. *Children's interests should be supported and honored through adult-child collaborative play.*

**Adult planned and directed play.** Adults plan, initiate, and direct children's play, and children follow adult directions—a child plays number bingo or recreates a figure seen on the front of a



Lego box. *Adult planned and directed play should be a **limited activity** for young children.*

### Make Time for Play. Parents, Family Members, and Caregivers Can:

**Provide playthings and familiar objects that kids can use in a variety of ways**—paper and crayons; dolls, toy animals, and vehicles; bags and boxes; Play-Doh.

**Take kids outdoors in all kinds of weather.** Encourage them to explore natural materials such as rocks, sticks, leaves, sand, water, and mud as well as simple playthings such as blocks and balls that encourage active play.

**Encourage imaginative play** by providing simple props such as pretend food and dress-up clothes. Play along when they pretend: “Oh, you’re a lion? Are you a scary lion?”

**Listen and observe a child's play.** Seeing a child line up toy dinosaurs by size shows her understanding of size comparisons and putting things in order.

- See <http://www.earlychildhoodfunders.org/pdf/playresources.pdf> for a list of resources to learn more about the importance of play for young children.
- 10 Things Every Parent Should Know About Play. National Association for the Education of Young Children. <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/10-things-every-parent-play>
- The Power of Play: Learning Through Play from Birth to 3. Zero to Three. <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/311-the-power-of-play>

This brief was written by Julie Nicholson, Professor of Practice at Mills College, based on a longer version of a play pamphlet produced by the Bay Area Early Childhood Funders. Some content comes from the California Department of Education-Early Learning and Care Division's book, *The Powerful Role of Play in Education* (2020). Amy Reff copyedited and designed the brief. For more information about the funders see [www.earlychildhoodfunders.org](http://www.earlychildhoodfunders.org).