Class 9

Childcare Programs

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Play: It's the Way Young Children Learn

Back to Basics: Play in Early Childhood

Discussion Questions:

Identify five child-centered curricula.

How is Direct Instruction different from Reggio Emilia?

What are some of the reasons for challenging behavior?

What are the three stages of learning?

Identify four classroom strategies you would be likely to use?

Why is play important for preschoolers?

How can teachers guide and extend play to help children learn more?

What is play?

Why is play important?

What is the value of observations?

What are Parten's five types of play?

Preschool Curricula: Finding One That Fits

VIVIAN BAXTER AND KAREN PETTY

What are your beliefs about how children should be educated? Do you think play is important? Is play more important than academics? Do you believe children should be allowed to explore and construct on their own with little instruction, or do you believe that they should be "taught" everything?

Knowing your values and beliefs about education can make you a more effective and efficient teacher.

Knowing your values and beliefs about education can make you a more effective and efficient teacher. It can also help you explain your program to parents.

With information, you will be able to find a curriculum that fits your values and beliefs.

This article offers a brief look at different preschool curriculum models. Within each model, there will be an overview and an explanation of the child's role and the teacher's role. With information, you will be able to find a curriculum that fits your values and beliefs.

Direct Instruction

Overview. The direct instruction model is academically based and teacher-centered. It is a highly structured instructional approach, designed to help at-risk students accelerate their learning (American Federation of Teachers 1998).

The main feature of the DI approach is the classroom scripts: The teacher presents activities, and the children respond to them. Classroom activities are continuous academic lessons that elicit positive reinforcements with correct responses (Schweinhart and Weikart 1998). The wording is designed to ensure consistency across the lessons and to guarantee that all students will comprehend the information presented (Association for Direct Instruction 2007).

The preschool design is to provide intensive academic instruction in reading, language, and math for at-risk students. The DI model is based on the premises that teachers can increase the amount of children's learning in the classroom by carefully planning the details of the student's interaction with their environment, and that the rate and the quality of children's learning is a function of environmental events (Jensen 2005).

Child's role. The child in a DI classroom is a recipient of learning instead of a participant in learning. Children are expected to meet the demands of the workload and work at a fast pace. Correct verbal responses are required, proper replies are expected, and children are questioned until appropriate answers are given. Children are grouped by ability as a means of allowing teachers to maintain the pace and the progress of the scripted material (Jensen 2005).

Teacher's role. The teacher is an authoritative figure, meaning that it is the teacher who plans and carries out the activities. It is the teacher who is responsible for determining what is being learned each day. The teacher works at a fast pace, giving lessons on various levels of difficulty at different times of the day. To motivate children and to keep them motivated, the teacher uses a system of rewards and praise (Jensen 2005).

Developmental-Interaction/ Bank Street

Overview. This is a child-centered approach focused on individual development. It stresses the importance of the whole child, and it recognizes the importance of both the cognitive and social parts of development.

The educational emphasis is the child's developmental progress toward competence (being capable in thought and action/movement), individuality (letting the child be unique and accepting that uniqueness), socialization (helping children learn to control their impulses and govern their own actions), and integration (helping children merge personal and impersonal experiences) (Goffin and Wilson 2001).

Developmental-interaction schools empower children to deal effectively with their environments. The school is an active

community, connected to the community around it, so it is not just an isolated place for learning (Roopnarine and Johnson 2005).

This model uses a play-based approach to early childhood education with goals of nurturing the ego development and overall mental health of the child (Frost et al. 2008).

Child's role. The child is a curious being actively engaged in the social and physical environment through sensorial exploration and experimentation (Jensen 2005; Roopnarine and Johnson 2005).

Teacher's role. The teacher is an observer (to watch the children and observe their progress), questioner (to ask questions to help children develop language skills), and planner (to plan opportunities for experiences that meet the needs of every child as an individual). The teacher facilitates and guides the children through activities that are initiated by the child and promotes play as a source of learning (Jensen 2005).

High/Scope

Overview. The High/Scope curriculum is play-based (Frost et al. 2008) and views children as active learners who create their own knowledge of the world (Samuelsson et al. 2006; High/Scope Educational Research Foundation 2007). Active learning means that the children have direct hands-on experiences with people, objects, events, and ideas, and they construct their own knowledge with these experiences (Epstein 2007).

Children take the first steps in the learning process by making choices and following through on their plans. After the children have made their plans, they experiment with their ideas. Teachers support the children in their endeavors by asking questions, providing the background support, guiding the planning process, and commenting on the children's progress (Frost et al. 2008; Samuelsson et al. 2006; Schweinhart and Weikart 1998; Walsh and Petty 2006). After the children have had time to experiment with their plans and ideas, they share and discuss their findings with their teachers and peers (Samuelsson et al. 2006).

Child's role. The child in a High/Scope classroom is an active learner, experimenter, and explorer. Children develop a sense of self as they interact with significant people in their environment.

Teacher's role. The teacher follows the children and their interests and does not impose ideas and beliefs on them. The teacher shares control with the child by following the child's lead in activities and play and by interacting on the child's level of understanding, and encouraging the child to achieve success (Jensen 2005). In this way, teachers are also active learners because they do not have a precise script. Instead, they listen closely to the child and then actively work with the child to extend activities to more challenging levels (Roopnarine and Johnson 2005).

Montessori

Overview. The Montessori method is a developmental, child-centered, hands-on approach to education. Although play was not central to Maria Montessori's view of education and development, some aspects of the curriculum are related to play. Children are allowed to choose materials and "play" with them. As children grow and develop, they no longer "play" with materials but instead prepare for lessons that refine the senses and create order (Frost et al. 2008).

In a Montessori classroom, children have the freedom to explore and construct knowledge by their participation in learning and by making their own choices and experiences. Montessori believed children have the power to teach themselves and the ability to develop freely if their minds are not oppressed by adults who may limit them (Tzuo 2007).

The classroom or environment contains a few essential materials to promote self-discovery and social development. Children learn to respect the work of others as they wait to use materials their peers are using (Walsh and Petty 2006).

Montessori classrooms are filled with children of mixed ages on the belief that children of different ages help one another. The younger children see what the older ones are working on and ask for explanations. Montessori believed that there are many things that the teacher cannot "convey to a child of three, but that a child of five can do with the utmost ease" (1995, 226). She also felt that "a child of three will take an interest in what a five-year-old is doing, since it is not far removed from their own powers," therefore making the older children heroes and teachers and the younger children their admirers (1995, 226).

Child's role. The children in a Montessori classroom are active learners who construct their own knowledge and understanding of the world and have the ability to control their focus and actions. Children are given freedom within a carefully prepared environment and have the opportunity for active involvement to develop according to their own developmental timetables and tendencies.

Teacher's role. The teacher or *directress* facilitates as opposed to teaching directly. The main responsibility of the directress is to prepare the environment to meet the needs of the children and to be an observer of the children's development (Jensen 2005). Teachers refrain from interfering with children while they are absorbed in their work and do not prevent the children's free expansion. The directress does, however, intervene in the negative behaviors of children and guides them toward the right track (Tzuo 2007).

Waldorf

Overview. The Waldorf education model seeks to educate the whole child: the head, heart, and hands (Chauncey 2006; Walsh and Petty 2006). This means that young children are working to develop their physical bodies and their will through activities that are hands-on instead of academic (Roopnarine and Johnson 2005).

The Waldorf model supports children in an aesthetic environment where creative play and artistic activities are frequent. This allows the children to learn about their world through movement (Walsh and Petty 2006).

A Waldorf classroom is designed to be an extension of the home (Roopnarine and Johnson 2005) on the belief that children relate what they learn to their own experiences and therefore are then deeply engaged and can readily integrate what they learn (Chauncey 2006).

This model is also concerned with the moral education of children, emphasizing that improving a child's sense of morality is of

Overview of Preschool Curriculum Models

Name	Teacher-Centered vs. Child-Centered	Approach	Child Groupings	Child's Role	Teacher's Role
Direct Instruction	teacher	provides intensive instruction in reading, language, and math, often for at-risk students	by ability	receives the learning	determines and presents the learning activities
Developmental Interaction/ Bank Street	child	focuses on the whole child as an individual with emphasis on intellectual and social-emotional skills	by age	actively engages in the social and physical environment	observes and guides children through learning
High/Scope	child	provides hands-on experiences to allow children to construct knowledge on their own	by age	actively experiments and explores	follows the children's lead and actively works to extend learning
Montessori	child	provides a carefully prepared environment in which children become actively involved and learn according to their own timetables	mixed ages	participates in learning by making choices and respecting others	prepares the environment to meet children's needs and facilitates learning
Waldorf	child	seeks to educate the whole child through a balance of head, heart, and hands in a family-like environment	mixed ages	learns through imaginary play and oral language	provides literacy-rich experiences
Reggio Emilia	child and family	provides play experiences and collaborative projects focusing on relationships with others	mixed ages	follows natural curiosity and engages in creative expression	learns alongside children and collaborates with other teachers to nurture and guide learning

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high importance as part of a child's well-being and development of educational abilities (Woodward 2005).

Waldorf classrooms are of mixed ages to promote a family-like atmosphere so that children become much like siblings. The younger children watch and imitate the older children, and the older children look out for and nurture the younger children (Roopnarine and Johnson 2005).

Child's role. The child learns through imaginary play, oral language, and hands-on experiences (Edwards 2002).

Teacher's role. The teacher provides language and literacy-rich experiences through stories, songs, and poems (Roopnarine and Johnson 2005).

Reggio Emilia

Overview. Reggio Emilia is a play-based approach centered on the child, the family, and the community. Families are made to feel welcome, and in return parents get an environment that supports their children's relational, aesthetic, and intellectual needs (New 2007).

In Reggio, play is considered essential and one of the "hundred languages." What or how the children play is not the main focus, rather it is the relationships that occur within the play experiences that are given greater attention. Teachers listen closely to children's conversation and work with them as equals in the development of learning activities and projects in the classroom (Fraser 2007). Reggio classrooms are designed to promote all areas of development, not just play.

Children spend much of their time in small or large groups collaborating on projects and play activities (Frost et al. 2008). Projects are at the center of the Reggio curriculum, but the teacher does not plan them in advance. Instead, the projects and the teacher follow the direction of the children's understanding and knowledge—giving rise to an "emergent curriculum." This approach also places a heavy emphasis on art as a means for children to express themselves (Judd 2007).

Child's role. The child's role or image in the Reggio classroom is that of being resourceful, curious, imaginative, and inventive (Gilman 2007). In the Reggio classroom, children are viewed as citizens of the community with the right to be taken seriously, respected for their intelligence and feelings, and valued for their lives (Goffin and Wilson 2001).

Teacher's role. The teacher is a nurturer, guide, and facilitator. Teachers work as a team to provide materials for open-ended discovery and problem solving and listen to and observe the children. By these methods, teachers are able to uncover children's thoughts, theories, and curiosities (Gilman 2007). Teachers encourage the children to explore and extend their own ideas and theories but do not give immediate answers (Judd 2007).

Mixed Methods

Many preschools have developed their own curriculum based on trial and error over time. These preschools have pulled ideas from various methods and theorists such as Montessori, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Gesell. Their idea is to reach the whole child. They reason that it is necessary to pull from different theorists because using just one theory may reach only part of the child. These approaches can be based on play or academics or they can be mixture of both.

Many religion-sponsored schools use a faith-based curriculum that emphasizes religious principles and may be combined with one or more of the approaches above.

Know Yourself

As a preschool educator, it is important to know how you want to teach. Do you want to guide education as you follow the child, or do you want to be in the front of the room "teaching" what the children are to learn? Whatever your beliefs, it is important to know them so you can find a school with the same educational beliefs. Knowing what kind of teacher you want to be and which curriculum fits you can help you to be the most effective and efficient teacher you can be.

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"You Got It!"

Teaching Social and Emotional Skills

LISE FOX, PHD AND ROCHELLE HARPER LENTINI, MED

Early educators report that one of their biggest challenges is supporting young children who have problem behavior beyond what might be expected (Buscemi et al. 1995; Hemmeter, Corso, & Cheatham 2005). Some children engage in problem behavior that is typical of a particular stage of development as they build relationships with peers and adults and learn to navigate the classroom environment. For example, a toddler might grab a cracker from another child's plate because she is still learning to use words to ask for what she wants or needs. What troubles teachers is how to meet the needs of children who have persistent problem behavior that does not respond to positive guidance or prevention practices. The extent of this problem is highlighted by recent reports on the rates of expulsion of children from preschool programs (Gilliam 2005).

The Teaching Pyramid

The teaching pyramid model (Fox et al. 2003) describes a primary level of universal practices—classroom preventive practices that promote the social and emotional development of all children—built on a foundation of positive relationships; secondary interventions that address specific social and emotional learning needs of children at risk for challenging behavior; and development of individualized interventions (tertiary level) for children with persistent problem behavior (see the diagram "The Teaching Pyramid"). The model is explained more fully in "The Teaching Pyramid: A Model for Supporting Social Competence and Reinventing Challenging Behavior in Young Children," in the July 2003 issue of *Young Children*.

The foundation for universal practices begins with nurturing and responsive caregiving that supports children in developing a positive sense of self and in engaging in relationships with others. At this level, teachers focus on their relationships with children and families. Universal classroom practices include developmentally appropriate, child-centered classroom environments that promote children's developing independence, successful interactions, and engagement in learning. While universal practices may be enough to promote the development of social competence in the majority of children in the classroom, teachers may find that there are children whose lack of social and emotional skills or whose challenging behavior requires more focused attention.

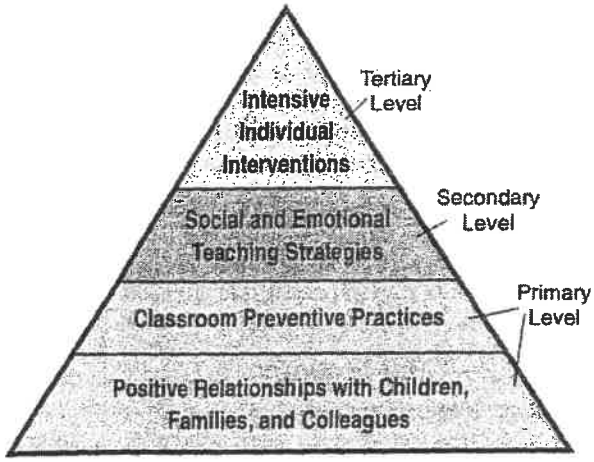
In this article we look at the secondary level of the teaching pyramid, which emphasizes planned instruction on specific social and emotional skills for children at risk for developing more challenging behavior, such as severe aggression, property destruction, noncompliance, or withdrawal. Children who may be considered at risk for challenging behavior are persistently noncompliant, have difficulty regulating their emotions, do not easily form relationships with adults and other children, have difficulty engaging in learning activities, and are perceived by teachers as being likely to develop more intractable behavior problems.

Teachers may find that there are children whose lack of social and emotional skills or whose challenging behavior requires more focused attention.

Research shows that when educators teach children the key skills they need to understand their emotions and the emotions of others, handle conflicts, problem solve, and develop relationships with peers, their problem behavior decreases and their social skills improve (Joseph & Strain 2003). Emphasis on teaching social skills is just one component of multiple strategies to support a child at risk for challenging behavior. Additional critical strategies include collaborating with the family; addressing the child's physical and mental health needs; and offering the support of specialists and other resources to address the child or family's individual needs.

Reframing Problem Behavior

The teaching pyramid model guides teachers to view a child's problem behavior as serving a purpose for that child. Some children may use problem behavior instead of socially



The Teaching Pyramid

conventional and appropriate behavior to avoid or join interactions and activities, obtain or avoid attention, and obtain objects. For example, a child who wants another child's toy may hit the other child instead of asking to have a turn with the toy. Other children may use problem behavior to express their disappointment or anger to the teacher, rather than asking for help or sharing their feelings with words. For example, a child may throw toys or destroy materials when frustrated rather than asking a teacher for help.

Reasons for Challenging Behavior

Children may use problem behavior to get their needs met for a variety of reasons. For example, a child may have language development problems, social-emotional delays, difficulties with peer interactions, or developmental disabilities; she may have experienced neglect or trauma; or she may simply have not had opportunities to learn appropriate social or communication skills before entering preschool.

When teachers view challenging behavior as actions children use to get their needs met, they can reframe problem behavior as a skill-learning or skill-fluency issue. *Skill fluency* refers to a child's ability to use a skill consistently and independently. Children with problem behavior may not have appropriate social or communication skills or may not use those skills well in a variety of situations. Reframing problem behavior as a skill-instruction issue opens the door to the development of effective strategies teachers can implement in the classroom: if young children with problem behavior are missing key social and communication skills, then a next step is to teach them those skills!

A Skill-learning Issue

Many skills are important in children's development of relationships with adults and peers. Skills help children learn self-regulation (ability to respond appropriately to anxiety, distress, or uncomfortable sensations) and how to problem solve (see "Social and Emotional Skills to Teach,"). Young children at risk for challenging behavior (children at the secondary intervention level) may not be fluent in or have the ability to use these skills. The teaching pyramid model encourages early educators to teach children these skills systematically, using planned procedures within developmentally appropriate activities and with sufficient intensity to ensure that children learn the skills quickly and can use them when needed (Grisham-Brown, Hemmeter, & Pretti-Frontczak 2005).

Social and Emotional Skills to Teach

- Following rules, routines, and directions
- Identifying feelings in oneself and others
- Controlling anger and impulses
- Problem solving
- Suggesting play themes and activities to peers
- Sharing toys and other materials
- Taking turns
- Helping adults and peers
- Giving compliments
- Understanding how and when to apologize
- Expressing empathy with others' feelings
- Recognizing that anger can interfere with problem solving
- Learning how to recognize anger in oneself and others
- Learning how to calm down
- Understanding appropriate ways to express anger

Teaching Social Skills

In thinking about how to teach social skills systematically, teachers need to be aware of the three stages of learning (Bailey & Wolery 1992) (see "Stages of Learning"). The first stage is skill acquisition—the skill is introduced to the child; the second stage is fluency—the child has learned the skill and can use it easily; and the final stage of learning is skill maintenance and generalization—the child can use the skill over time and in new situations. In this article, we present strategies for addressing each stage of learning in the instruction of social skills.

It is important to identify the skill, demonstrate or identify when it is used, and link the idea or concept to other skills the child has.

Introducing a New Skill: Show-and-Tell

Explain the new skill. When you first teach a child a social or emotional skill, it is important to ensure that you have explained the skill in concrete terms so the child understands what the skill is and when to use it. Children who have social

development challenges may find the nuances of social behavior difficult to interpret. Thus, it is important to identify the skill ("ask to take a turn"), demonstrate or identify when it is used ("Watch Emily ask to play with the water wheel"), and link the idea or concept to other skills the child has ("When you see your friends playing with a toy you want, you can watch them play, you can wait for a turn, or you can ask them for a turn").

Demonstrate it. For many children, it is helpful to provide both a positive example of someone using a skill and an example in which the skill is not used. For example, you may ask children to demonstrate the wrong way to ask for a turn and the correct way to ask for a turn. In this manner, children can practice under a teacher's guidance and receive additional information about how the skill is appropriately used.

Give positive feedback. When children first learn a new skill, they need feedback and specific encouragement on their efforts to use the skill. The importance of feedback cannot be overstated! Think, for example, about a time when you learned something new—such as a language, a sport, or a craft. The instructor most likely gave you feedback: "That's right, you did it" or "That looks good, I think you are getting it." Feedback may provide the support a child needs to persist in practicing a newly learned skill. Have you ever tried to learn a new skill and quit when you were in the early learning stages? Perhaps you did not receive encouragement or maybe those initial attempts were so uncomfortable or awkward that you decided to stop practicing.

Provide opportunities for practice. There are a variety of instructional methods for teaching new social and emotional skills (Webster-Stratton 1999; Hyson 2004; Kaiser & Rasminsky 2007). An important teaching practice at the acquisition stage of learning is providing multiple opportunities for a child to learn a skill in meaningful contexts—that is, in activities that are part of the child's natural play or routines. The more opportunities for practicing, the quicker the child will learn the skill. The box "Classroom Teaching Strategies" lists a variety of ways to teach social and emotional skills within typical classroom activities.

When a child learns a new skill, he needs to practice to build fluency in the skill.

Building Fluency: Practice Makes Perfect

When learning to play a new song on the piano, the player must practice before the song becomes easy to play. Similarly, when a child learns a new skill, he needs to practice to build fluency in the skill. When teaching social skills, teachers need to ensure that a skill is not only learned but also practiced often enough that the child becomes fluent in the skill and can easily use it. Consider the following example:

> Madison struggles when playing with peers. Recognizing that Madison needs extra help in learning how to ask others to play with toys, her teacher, Mr. Jackson, decides to read the children a story about taking turns and asking to join play during group time. On that same day, several times during center activities and outdoor play, Mr. Jackson reminds Madison to "ask to play." After that day of focused instruction on using the skill, whenever Madison tries to enter a game without asking to play, Mr. Jackson provides corrective feedback or redirection, stating, "Madison, you need to ask to play" or "Madison, you may not grab toys; ask to play." A month later, Madison still has difficulty entering play and asking to play with toys.

Why did Madison have difficulty learning the skill? Perhaps Mr. Jackson did not provide enough opportunities to practice, so

Stages of Learning

Stage 1—Skill Acquisition

Show-and-Tell

The teacher introduces a new skill to a child by giving concrete examples of what the skill is and how to use it. For example, the teacher may say, "It's hard to wait until it is your turn to ride a trike. I'm going to help you learn how to wait."

Stage 2—Skill Fluency

Practice Makes Perfect

The teacher provides many opportunities to practice the skill so the child can eventually use it with ease. Practice opportunities may include prompting the child ("How can you ask to play with Brendan?"), helping the child remember to use the skill ("I know you are disappointed and you want a turn right now. What can you do instead?"), and identifying situations that call for the use of the skill ("We have three children who want to sit at the art table and only one chair. What can we do?").

Stage 3—Skill Maintenance and Generalization

"You Got It!"

The teacher continues to promote the child's use of the skill in familiar and new situations. For example, when the child uses his newly learned skill of giving compliments with his mother, the teacher says, "You gave your mom a compliment! Look, she's smiling because you said you like her haircut."

Adapted from D.B. Bailey & M. Wolery, *Teaching Infants and Preschoolers with Disabilities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992).

Classroom Teaching Strategies

Instruction is more effective when it is embedded in the meaningful activities and contexts that occur throughout a child's day (Katz & McClellan 1997). Here are suggestions and examples for teaching social skills within classroom activities.

Modeling. Demonstrate the skill while explaining what you are doing. As you pass a block to a child, say, "Look, I am sharing my blocks with my friend."

Modeling with puppets. Use puppets to model the skill while interacting with a child, an adult, or another puppet. A puppet can explain to the teacher and the class how she became angry and hit her brother to get a toy. You can ask the puppet to consider other solutions and then discuss what a child might do when he or she wants a toy that another child is using.

Preparing peer partners. Ask one child to show another child the skill or to help the child use the target skill. You can prompt the peer by saying, "Carmen, Justin is still learning how to wait and take turns. Since you know what to do, can you help him? Show him the line-up picture while you wait for a drink at the water fountain."

Singing. Introduce a new skill through a song. To teach children to trade toys, pass out small toys during a large group activity, then sing the following song to the tune of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and practice trading:

> I can be a problem solver, problem solver, problem solver, I can be a problem solver, let me show you how. Maybe I can trade with you, trade with you, trade with you, Maybe I can trade with you; let me show you how.

Children then practice trading toys with each other.

Doing fingerplays. Introduce the skill with a fingerplay, then follow up with a discussion or story. While showing fingers, have children recite this rhyme:

> One little friend cried, "Boo-hoo"; a friend gives a hug and then there are two.
> Two little friends share with me; we play together and that makes three.
> Three little friends ask for more; they all say "Please," and then comes four.
> Four little friends take turns down the slide; another comes to play, and that makes five.
> Five little friends have fun at school, because they follow every rule.

Using a flannel board. Introduce a new skill using flannel board activities and stories. For example, to teach turn taking you could have flannel pieces for Humpty Dumpty and change the rhyme so that "All the king's horses and all the king's friends / Work as a team to put Humpty together again." As you say the rhyme, have the children take turns putting the pieces (castle, bricks, Humpty Dumpty pieces, horses, and friends) on the flannel board. When you finish the rhyme, extend the activity by talking about how Humpty felt when he sat on the wall; when he fell; and when his friends helped put him back together.

Using prompts. Give a child verbal, visual, or physical prompts to use a skill during interactions and activities. When a child who has difficulty with initiating play interactions moves toward a group playing together, you might say privately, "Remember to use your words and ask to play."

Giving encouragement. Provide specific feedback when the child uses the skill. For example, describe what the child did: "You asked Joey for a turn. I saw that you two had a good time playing together." Encouragement can be verbal or a signal (a thumbs-up or high five).

Using incidental teaching. Guide the child to use the skill during interactions and activities. Quietly say to the child, "Quan, I see that you are very angry that all the trucks are being used. What can you do when you are angry? Let's go over the steps."

Playing games. Use games to teach problem solving, words that express feelings, identification of others' feelings, friendship skills, and so on. Place photographs of each child in a bag. Have the children take turns pulling a photo out of the bag and offering a compliment to the child in the photo.

Discussing children's literature. Read books to help teach friendship skills, feeling words, problem solving, and so on. While reading a story, pause and ask the children how a character in the story might feel or ask them to suggest ideas for solving the character's problem.

Additional ideas for many of these activities may be found on the Web site of the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, at www.csefel.uiuc.edu. Under **Resources**, click on **Practical Strategies**.

Madison quickly forgot to use the new skill. Or possibly Madison had not learned when and how to use the skill: she may not have become fluent in the skill.

Teachers can offer repeated opportunities to practice the skill in familiar and new situations.

To ensure that children learn a skill to the fluency level, teachers can use several strategies. They may offer the child multiple opportunities to practice, help the child link the new concept or skill to other social skills, or remind the child in advance so he or she can use the skill or concept in new situations.

Scaffolding the use of the skill within interactions may be effective. For example, the teacher can monitor child interactions and offer a verbal bridge for problem solving when children have conflicts or face difficulties (Katz & McClellan 1997). The teacher can pose questions like "What else can you do?" to

help children problem solve or "How do you think Emily felt when you said that?" to help them take the perspective of the other child. When scaffolding, the teacher need only offer as much support or guidance as the child requires to navigate the situation, and she should be cautious about becoming overly directive or controlling the situation.

Additional teaching techniques to promote fluency include reminding the child, as she goes into a situation, to use the new skill; creating opportunities to practice by staging situations that call for the skill (creating a problem-solving task or planning an activity that requires sharing or taking turns); and providing the child with peer buddies who can remind her to use the new skill.

In the fluency stage of learning, the teacher should continue to offer encouragement when the child is practicing the skill.

Promoting Maintenance and Generalization: "You Got It!"

For a child acquiring a new social skill, the final stage of learning is maintaining and generalizing the skill—learning it to the point that it becomes part of the child's social skill repertoire and he uses it in familiar and in new situations. When teaching children social skills, it is important to ensure that children reach this stage.

For many children, moving from skill acquisition to skill generalization occurs quickly and seamlessly with little teacher effort. However, for children who are at risk for social development delays or challenging behavior, a more systematic approach may be needed.

To ensure maintenance and generalization of a new skill, after introducing the skill and providing practice opportunities, teachers can offer repeated opportunities to practice the skill in familiar and new situations. At this stage of learning, children continue to need occasional encouragement to remember to use the skills, and they need feedback on the successful use of the skill in new situations. The example that follows describes how Ben's teacher supported and encouraged Ben to use his newly learned problem-solving ability in new situations.

> Four-year-old Ben tends to get very frustrated when playing with his peers, especially on the playground. He screams, pushes children, and grabs toys. Ms. Mitchell, his teacher, has introduced a four-step problem-solving process to the class, using a puppet (who has a problem to solve) and picture cards depicting the problem-solving process: (1) Ask yourself, What's my problem? (2) Think, think, think of some solutions; (3) What would happen? and (4) Give it a try.
>
> Although Ben uses the process during play times, Ms. Mitchell realizes that he needs additional prompting to problem solve in new situations. Today the class is visiting the children's museum. Before entering, Ms. Mitchell takes Ben aside and reviews the problem-solving steps.
>
> Inside the museum, there are several magnet activity stations, all occupied. Knowing that Ben will want to play with the magnets, Ms. Mitchell moves near him to give him support. She reminds Ben about the problem-solving steps: "Remember, think, think, think." Ben then says to a child playing with the magnets, "Can I play too?" The child hands him a magnet and they build together. Ms. Mitchell looks at Ben, winks, and smiles.

The goal at this stage of instruction is for children to use the social skills they have learned in a variety of situations, helping them build satisfying relationships with children and adults. They are then motivated by their successes and the joy they experience playing and developing relationships. As children develop new social skills and grow in their social competence, they gain access to a wider variety of play and learning opportunities; increase the duration and complexity of play interactions and engagement in social interactions; build friendships with peers; and feel good about themselves.

Conclusions

It is critically important that early educators identify children who need focused instruction—children who may be considered at risk for challenging behavior. Teachers can guide them to learn new social and emotional skills, teaching them within child-centered, developmentally appropriate activities. It is equally important to design a systematic teaching approach that allows such children to acquire and use their new skills easily, over time, and in a variety of situations.

When young children do not know how to identify emotions, handle disappointment and anger, or develop relationships with peers, a teacher's best response is to teach!

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Teaching Pyramid diagram adapted from L. Fox, G. Dunlap, M.L. Hemmeter, G.E. Joseph, & P.S. Strain, "The Teaching Pyramid: A Model for Supporting Social Competence and Preventing Challenging Behavior in Young Children," *Young Children* 58 (July 2003): 49.

Play

It's the way young children learn

A generation ago, kindergarten was supposed to get kids ready for school. But now everyone is talking about the importance of "school readiness" before kids get to kindergarten.

That's why many parents, anxious for their children to succeed in school, want early care and education programs to have children sit at tables using work sheets, drills, and flash cards to learn letters and numbers and even starting to read, add, and subtract.

But preschoolers learn differently from school-age children: play is essential to early learning. Play is the main way children learn and develop ideas about the world. It helps them build the skills necessary for critical thinking and leadership. It's how they learn to problem-solve and to feel good about their ability to learn.

Children learn the most from play when they have skilled teachers who are well-trained in understanding how play contributes to learning.

Most child development experts agree that play is an essential part of a high-quality early learning program. Play is not a break from learning—it's the way young children learn.

High-quality preschools provide lasting benefits

Many studies have shown that high-quality preschool and child care programs have lasting benefits. Three studies, which followed children for many years, showed that taxpayers saved at least $2.69 for every dollar spent on high-quality early learning programs, by reducing special education, law-enforcement, and other costs.

In all these high-quality programs, "child-initiated" activities were important—highly trained teachers used children's interests and activities to guide learning. Kids got to choose from appropriate activities, rather than spending all their time following teachers' instructions.

Several studies have shown that children learn more from educational activities that support their own interests and ideas. Some researchers have found evidence that too much teacher-directed activity undermines young children's self-confidence and motivation to learn.

Play promotes school success in many ways

Researchers are finding more and more connections between children's play and the learning and social development that helps them succeed in school. For example, pretend play helps children learn to think abstractly and to look at things from someone else's perspective. Pretend play is also connected to early literacy, mathematical thinking, and problem-solving.

When children play:

- They test their developing ideas with objects, people, and situations—the key ability for academic learning.
- They develop many kinds of skills together—physical, social, emotional, thinking, and language.
- They are doing things they are interested in, so they have a natural motivation to learn.
- They develop concepts and skills together. For example, as a child learns to write the letters in her name, she is also learning the concept that each letter represents a sound. And she is very motivated by the meaning—

her own name! Children are more likely to remember skills and concepts they have learned by doing things that are meaningful to them.

- They learn from other children and develop social skills by playing together.

When children play, they learn skills that contribute to school success

Using one thing to represent another

Through pretend play, children learn to use their imaginations to represent objects, people, and ideas.

What you see:

- A toddler flaps her arms, pretending to be a butterfly.
- Another picks up a banana, holds it to his ear like a telephone, and says, "Hello."
- A preschooler builds a firehouse with blocks.

How it promotes school success:

If children can use one thing to represent something else, it's easier for them to understand that letters represent sounds and numbers represent quantities. And later on they will be able to use their imaginations to visualize historical events or scientific ideas.

Using language and telling stories

Through pretend play, children develop their skills in using language and in telling and understanding stories.

What you see:

- Children act out scenes in the housekeeping corner.
- A child makes her stuffed animal "talk," telling a story.

How it promotes school success:

Oral language skills and storytelling are the building blocks of reading and writing, as well as subjects like social studies and science.

Using experimentation and logic

When children play with materials such as blocks, clay, sand, and water, they develop skills in logic. They experiment with cause and effect, with counting and sorting things, and with putting them in order. They learn how to invent strategies for solving problems.

What you see:

- Children experiment with blocks to figure out how to build a stable structure.
- Children count the number of cups needed for a "tea party."
- Children pour sand into different sized containers.

How it promotes school success:

This practice in experimenting, observing, comparing, and working with shapes, sizes, and quantities forms the basis for understanding math and science and for higher-order thinking.

Developing self control and social skills

As children share materials and play together, they learn to cooperate, listen to others, stand up for their own ideas, handle frustration, and empathize.

What you see:

- Children negotiate over roles in dramatic play: "We can both be pilots if we have two seats."
- One child cries and another says, "Don't worry, your mom is coming soon."

How it promotes school success:

Many studies have shown that kids with good social skills and emotional health do better in school and are more likely to avoid dangerous behavior as teenagers. Through play, children develop their ability to form relationships with other children and with teachers.

Learning to enjoy learning

When children do activities they have chosen, learning is enjoyable. It's based on their own interests and gives them a sense of competence.

What you see:

- Classrooms organized with different activity centers (blocks, dramatic play, painting and drawing, reading, science, etc.).
- Children encouraged to choose their own activities.

How it promotes school success:

Studies show that children's attitudes of curiosity, motivation, and competence are key to success in elementary school.

The teacher is key to play-based learning

Children learn more through play when they have well-trained teachers who know how to promote, respond to, guide, and extend their play to increase learning—and how to assess their development by observing their play.

Teachers can:

Guide and extend play to help children learn more

- **Provide materials for unstructured play:** Teachers put out collections of objects like cards or shells that children can arrange, sort, count or tell stories about. They provide "open-ended" materials like paper and crayons or sand and water. Children combine materials from different areas—a child brings a doll to the block area to build her a house.
- **Promote dramatic play:** Teachers create areas of the classroom with props that encourage imagination, like pretend food and dress-up clothes.

- **Include outdoor play:** Teachers create or bring children to outdoor play areas that include opportunities for physical play and experimentation with natural materials such as water, dirt, leaves, and sand.
- **Respond to play:** A teacher sees a child playing and builds vocabulary by providing new words: "That's interesting. You've lined up the animals from tiny to gigantic."
- **Extend play:** A teacher hears children making silly rhymes: "You're juicy, goosey, foosey." She extends this play by teaching songs that play with the sounds of language, such as "Apples and Bananas." She knows that this helps children learn to recognize the separate sounds in words.

A teacher observes a child pretending a chair is a car and "driving." She encourages imagination by asking, "Where are you going? What do you see along the way?"

- **Guide play:** One week a teacher turns the dress-up area into a shoe store. Children practice language and social skills by acting out "customers" and "sales people." They learn new vocabulary (canvas, boots). They use art to make signs for the store. Some older preschoolers may write letters and words for the signs, or practice simple math by making change for purchases.

Assess children's development by watching them play

- **Observe the child's activities:** Seeing a child line up toy dinosaurs by size shows her understanding of size comparisons and putting things in order.
- **Listen to the child talk:** Hearing a child talk about what letters "say" shows his understanding that letters represent words.
- **Take photos:** A series of photos of a child's block structures over time shows that she is learning more about spatial relations.

Parents can:

- **Provide playthings that kids can use in a variety of ways:** blocks, paper and crayons, dolls and toy animals, balls, playdough, etc.
- **Encourage kids to play with ordinary household objects** like pots and pans, utensils, spools of thread.
- **Take kids outdoors in all kinds of weather.** Encourage them to explore natural materials like rocks, sticks, and mud. Provide simple playthings such as blocks and balls that encourage children to be active and use their imaginations, not to watch while a toy does tricks.
- **Encourage imaginative play** by providing simple props like a collection of old hats or scarves. Play along when they pretend: "Oh, you're a lion? Are you a scary lion?"
- **Play with your children**, ask them questions about their play ("What are those animals doing?"), and point out things you notice ("You used a lot of bright colors in that picture!").
- **Look for child care and preschool programs** where children learn through play. Ask: How does this program use play to help children learn?

Policy recommendations

Because play is so important to developing the skills, concepts, and approaches children will use throughout their lives, public policy should support early education that emphasizes play. Parents and child care providers can urge policymakers to:

- Adopt guidelines for preschool programs that emphasize the importance of play.
- Develop or choose curricula and learning materials that emphasize play.
- Support in-depth training and ongoing education for early childhood educators, including elementary school teachers, about how to use play to promote learning.
- Educate parents about the importance of play.

For more about play and learning

On the Internet

- Alliance for Childhood: Time for Play Every Day: It's Fun and Fundamental, www.allianceforchildhood.net/projects/lay/pdf_files/play_fact_sheet.pdf and *Playwork and Play*, www.allianceforchildhood.net/projects/play/_pdf_files/Playwork.pdf
- Child Care Exchange provides free downloads and low-cost published materials for teachers and parents, www.ccie.com/
- Article on Reclaiming Play available at https://secure.ccie.com/catalog/product_info.php?products_id=5018044&search=&category=50
- Childhood: A Time for Play, National Kindergarten Association, www.nkateach.org/NKA/_Research_files/PlayPaper.pdf
- A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play (excerpt), www.communityplaythings.com/resources/articles/dramaticplay/childswork.html
- The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds, American Academy of Pediatrics, http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/119/1/182
- A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool, www.mandateforplayfullearning.com
- National Association for the Education of Young Children publishes Early Years are Learning Years, short articles for parents and child care providers, including many on "play and learning." 800-424-2460, www.nacyc.org/ece/eyly
- National Public Radio: Old-Fashioned Play Builds Serious Skills, Alix Spiegel, www.npr.org/templates/_story/story.php?storyId=19212514
- Creative Play Makes for Kids in Control, Alix Spiegel, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=76838288
- Play in the Early Years, Key to School Success, Bay Area Early Childhood Funders, www.4children.org/images/pdf/play07.pdf
- Zero to Three has many publications on understanding and making the most of children's play. 202-638-1144, www.zerotothree.org

Books (check your local library or bookstore or find new or used online)

- *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play*, Vivian Gussin Paley, University of Chicago Press, 2004
- *Einstein Never Used Flash Cards*, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, Diane Eyer, Rodale Press, 2003
- *Outdoor Play: Teaching Strategies*, Jane P. Perry, Teachers College Press, 2001
- *Play at the Center of the Curriculum*, by Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, and Alward, 4th edition, 2007, Merrill/Prentice Hall
- *Playing to Get Smart*, Elizabeth Jones and Renatta Cooper, Teachers College Press, 2005
- *The Power of Play*, David Elkind, Da Capo Press, 2007
- Scholastic *Learning Through Play* series, including: Dramatic Play, Music and Movement, Art, Problem-Solving, Language, Cooking, Blocks, Science, Math, Literacy, and more. This series is out of print but many titles are available at Amazon.com
- *Spotlight on Young Children and Play*, Derry Koralek, ed., NAEYC, 2004

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For more information, go to www.4children.org/ecf.htm or call 415-733-8576. To order more copies, or for this pamphlet in other languages (Spanish, Farsi, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese), go to: www.4children.org/images/pdf/Play_brief_order_form.pdf

Back to Basics

Play in Early Childhood

JILL ENGLEBRIGHT FOX, PHD

Kyle plays with blocks and builds a castle. Tony and Victoria play fire station and pretend to be firefighters. Kenzo and Carl play catch with a ball. Children playact with playmates in the playhouse. Playgroups on the playground choose players to play ball. As an early childhood professional, you probably use the word "play" a hundred times per day.

Research indicates that children learn best in an environment which allows them to explore, discover, and play. Play is an important part of a developmentally appropriate child care program. It is also closely tied to the development of cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical behaviors. But what exactly does it mean to play and why is play so important for young children?

What Is Play?

Although it is simple to compile a list of play activities, it is much more difficult to define play. Scales, et al., (1991) called play "that absorbing activity in which healthy young children participate with enthusiasm and abandon" (p. 15). Csikszentmihalyi (1981) described play as "a subset of life . . . an arrangement in which one can practice behavior without dreading its consequences" (p. 14). Garvey (1977) gave a useful description of play for teachers when she defined play as an activity which is: 1) positively valued by the player; 2) self-motivated; 3) freely chosen; 4) engaging; and 5) which "has certain systematic relations to what is not play" (p. 5). These characteristics are important for teachers to remember because imposing adult values, requirements, or motivations on children's activities may change the very nature of play.

According to *Webster's Desk Dictionary of the English Language*, the word play has 34 different meanings. In terms of young children and play, the following definitions from Webster's are useful:

- light, brisk, or changing movement (e.g., to pretend you're a butterfly)
- to act or imitate the part of a person or character (e.g., to play house)
- to employ a piece of equipment (e.g., to play blocks)
- exercise for amusement or recreation (e.g., to play tag)
- fun or jest, as opposed to seriousness (e.g., to play peek-a-boo or sing a silly song)
- the action of a game (e.g., to play duck-duck-goose)

Why Is Play Important?

According to Fromberg and Gullo (1992), play enhances language development, social competence, creativity, imagination, and thinking skills. Frost (1992) concurred, stating that "play is the chief vehicle for the development of imagination and intelligence, language, social skills, and perceptual-motor abilities in infants and young children" (p. 48).

Garvey (1977) states that play is most common during childhood when children's knowledge of self, comprehension of verbal and non-verbal communication, and understanding of the physical and social worlds are expanding dramatically.

Fromberg (1990) claims that play is the "ultimate integrator of human experience" (p. 223). This means that when children play, they draw upon their past experiences—things they have done, seen others do, read about, or seen on television—and they use these experiences to build games, play scenarios, and engage in activities.

Children use fine and gross motor skills in their play. They react to each other socially. They think about what they are doing or going to do. They use language to talk to each other or to themselves and they very often respond emotionally to the play activity. The integration of these different types of behaviors is key to the cognitive development of young children. According to Rogers and Sawyer (1988), "until at least the age of nine, children's cognitive structures function best in this unified mode" (p. 58). Because children's play draws upon all of these behaviors, it is a very effective vehicle for learning.

Play and Cognitive Development

The relationship between play and cognitive development is described differently in the two theories of cognitive development which dominate early childhood education—Piaget's and Vygotsky's.

Piaget (1962) defined play as assimilation, or the child's efforts to make environmental stimuli match his or her own concepts. Piagetian theory holds that play, in and of itself, does not necessarily result in the formation of new cognitive structures. Piaget claimed that play was just for pleasure, and while it allowed children to practice things they had previously learned, it did not necessarily result in the learning of new things. In other words, play reflects what the child has already learned but does not necessarily teach the child anything new. In this view, play is seen as a "process reflective of emerging symbolic development, but contributing little to it" (Johnsen & Christie, 1986, p. 51).

In contrast, Vygotskian theory states that play actually facilitates cognitive development. Children not only practice what they already know, they also learn new things. In discussing Vygotsky's theory, Vandenberg (1986) remarks that "play not so much reflects thought (as Piaget suggests) as it creates thought" (p. 21).

Observations of children at play yield examples to support both Piagetian and Vygotskian theories of play. A child who puts on a raincoat and a firefighter's hat and rushes to rescue his teddy bear from the pretend flames in his playhouse is practicing what he has previously learned about firefighters. This supports Piaget's theory. On the other hand, a child in the block center who announces to his teacher, "Look! When I put these two square blocks together, I get a rectangle!" has constructed new knowledge through her play. This supports Vygotsky's theory.

Whether children are practicing what they have learned in other settings or are constructing new knowledge, it is clear that play has a valuable role in the early childhood classroom.

Play—Indoors and Out

Early childhood teachers have long recognized the value of play in programs for young children. Unfortunately, teachers often fail to take advantage of the opportunities play provides for observing children's development and learning. Through such observations teachers can learn about children's social interactions, cognitive and language abilities, motor skills, and emotional development.

Frost (1992) recommends that observing children at play be a daily responsibility for early childhood professionals. Regular observations provide teachers with assessment information for identifying children with special needs, planning future play experiences, evaluating play materials, determining areas of strength and weakness for individual children, planning curriculum for individual children, reporting to parents, and checking on a child's on-going progress. The increased use of authentic assessment strategies is making observations of children's play more commonplace in early childhood classrooms.

Hymes (1981) recommends that children have two classrooms—one indoors and one outdoors. The outdoor play environment should be used as an extension of the indoor classroom. It should be a learning environment as carefully planned as the indoor activity centers and should encourage motor and social skills as well as help children refine existing cognitive structures and construct new ones. Used in this way, the outdoor play environment provides a basis for observational assessment in all areas of development.

Fox (1993) researched the practicality of observing young children's cognitive development during outdoor play. Her observations of four- and five-year-old children during outdoor play found examples of addition and subtraction, shape identification, patterning, one-to-one correspondence, number sense, sequencing of events, use of ordinal numbers, knowledge of prepositions, and identification of final and initial consonants. Fox's outdoor observations also found multiple examples of problem-solving, creative thinking, social competence, language use, and gross and fine motor skills. Although outdoor observations do not replace classroom assessment, they can provide valuable information for teachers of young children. As Fox stated, "These observations can be performed unobtrusively, without intruding upon the children's activities and without placing children in a stressful testing situation" (p. 131).

Parten's Five Types of Play

Play for young children assumes many different forms. Mildred Parten (1932) was one of the early researchers studying children at play. She focused on the social interactions between children during play activities. Parten's categories of play are not hierarchical. Depending on the circumstances, children may engage in any of the different types of play. Parten does note, however, that in her research with two- to five-year-olds, "participation in the most social types of groups occurs most frequently among the older children" (p. 259).

Extra playtime allows children to become involved in more complex and productive play activities.

- **Onlooker behavior**—Playing passively by watching or conversing with other children engaged in play activities.
- **Solitary independent**—Playing by oneself.
- **Parallel**—Playing, even in the middle of a group, while remaining engrossed in one's own activity. Children playing parallel to each other sometimes use each other's toys, but always maintain their independence.
- **Associative**—When children share materials and talk to each other, but do not coordinate play objectives or interests.
- **Cooperative**—When children organize themselves into roles with specific goals in mind (e.g., to assign the roles of doctor, nurse, and patient and play hospital).

How Much Should Children Play?

Indoors and outdoors, children need large blocks of time for play. According to Christie and Wardle (1992), short play periods may require children to abandon their group dramatizations or constructive play just when they begin to get involved. When this happens a number of times, children may give up on more sophisticated forms of play and settle for less advanced forms that can be completed in short periods of time. Shorter play periods reduce both the amount and the maturity of children's play, and many important benefits of play, such as persistence, negotiation, problem solving, planning, and cooperation are lost. Large blocks of time (30 to 60 minutes, or longer) should be scheduled for indoor and outdoor play periods. Christie and Wardle remind teachers that extra playtime does not result in children becoming bored. Instead, it prompts children to become involved in more complex, more productive play activities.

The Teacher's Role

The early childhood teacher is the facilitator of play in the classroom. The teacher facilitates play by providing appropriate indoor and outdoor play environments. Safety is, of course, the primary concern. Age and developmental levels must be carefully considered in the design and selection of materials. Guidelines for selecting safe and appropriate equipment for outdoor play environments are available through the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's Handbook for Public Playground Safety and the Playground Safety Manual by Jambor and Palmer (1991). Similar guidelines are also available for indoor settings (Torelli & Durrett, 1996; Caples, 1996; Ard & Pitts, 1990). Once appropriate environments and materials are in place, regular safety checks and maintenance are needed to ensure that the equipment is sound and safe for continued play.

Teachers also facilitate play by working with children to develop rules for safe indoor and outdoor play. Discussion about the appropriate use of materials, the safe number of participants on each piece of equipment, taking turns, sharing, and cleaning up provides the children with information to begin their play activities. These discussions need to be ongoing because some children may need frequent reminders about rules and because new situations may arise (e.g., new equipment).

By providing play materials related to thematic instruction, early childhood teachers can establish links between the children's indoor and outdoor play and their program's curriculum. Thematic props for dramatic play can be placed in the dramatic play center or stored in prop boxes and taken outside to extend the dramatic play to a new setting. An art center in the outdoor play environment may encourage children to explore the possibilities of using leaves, twigs, pebbles, and sand in their three-dimensional art productions. Painting easels and water tables may also be moved outside periodically for children's use during outdoor play periods. Finally, a collection of books stored in a wagon to be taken outside during play time may offer some children a needed alternative to more active play.

As facilitators of children's play, teachers should closely observe children during play periods not only for assessment purposes, as stated earlier, but also to facilitate appropriate social interactions and motor behaviors. It is important that children be the decision-makers during play, choosing what and where to play, choosing roles for each player, and choosing how play will proceed. Occasionally, however, some children will need adult assistance in joining a play group, modifying behavior, or negotiating a disagreement. Careful observation will help the teacher to decide when to offer assistance and what form that assistance should take.

Conclusion

Although play is a difficult concept to define, it is very easy to recognize. Children actively involved in play may be engaged in a variety of activities, independently, with a partner, or in a group. Because play is closely tied to the cognitive, socio-emotional, and motor development of young children, it is an important part of developmentally appropriate early childhood programs.

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