



## BabyTalks: Playing to Learn—Benefits of Play in Early Childhood

Below are recommended stopping points and suggested questions to use in your T/TA work. Please feel free to follow your group's lead and discuss topics and questions that are of greatest value to them! If you're working with larger numbers, you may find it useful to discuss these questions in smaller groups and then reunite to summarize.

### Learning objectives

At the end of this presentation, you should be able to:

- 1) Explain why playtime is an important part of childhood development.
- 2) Describe how play changes and develops as a child grows.
- 3) Understand how different play behaviors can facilitate academic learning
- 4) Identify ways to deepen children's learning through play.

### Presentation Overview

*Playful Learning: Why Playtime is an Important Part of Childhood Development (Slides 4-8)*

#### ☉ Recommended stopping point: After Slide 8

- Researchers indicate that play is child-directed, joyful, and voluntary. During play, children are uniquely engaged and motivated, and often explore the edges of their knowledge and abilities. Why do you think play may be an important learning tool?
- Think about a typical day for the children you work with: at what points throughout the day do they engage in play? Given the definition of play above, does recess or other scheduled play time "count" as play? Why or why not? What ideas do you have to allow for child-initiated play time within the structure of a daycare or classroom schedule?
- There is evidence that children retain information longer and explore more in play-based learning contexts than in non-play-based contexts. Based on your experiences and work with children, what ideas do you have for why this might be true?

**From Research to Practice:** Children may choose ways of playing that push their learning and growth in new directions. For example, a child might decide to play with a toy they haven't figured out yet over a toy that seems "easy".

- In your own work, have you ever noticed a child "playing to learn" like this? What skill or idea were they trying to figure out? Did an adult facilitate this experience, or was it child-directed? What do you think motivated the child to push their learning? Do you have ideas for how you might help support or facilitate this kind of playing to learn?
- How do you think the quality and experience of learning might differ between a child who is playing to learn and a child who is told what they should figure out? Can you think of examples from your own work where these two contrasting experiences have happened? Discuss and compare these scenarios.

*Play Changes and Develops as a Child Grows (Slides 9-14)*

#### ☉ Recommended stopping point: After Slide 14

- Children's play becomes more sophisticated as they get older. Think about your work with different children from birth to five years of age. How might you support their play as

they develop and grow? How could you facilitate play with children of different ages in a way that is appropriate for the developmental stage of each child?

- Imagine two children of different ages, a 12-month-old and a 4-year-old, for example. Discuss strategies for ensuring that each child is supported in play appropriate for their age.

**From Research to Practice:** As adults we can use open-ended toys and objects to engage children at a variety of levels. Think about the stages of play from birth to age five and consider how you might use the same set of toys to engage children in each age group. For example, how could you use a set of stacking cups to engage each of the age groups in age-appropriate playtime? Look around the room and choose several different objects to explore how you could also use that object as a toy to engage with each of the age groups in age-appropriate play.

*Early Learning Outcomes Framework: How Playtime Promotes Childhood Development (Slides 15-36)*

⦿ **Recommended stopping point: After Slide 36**

- The Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF) shows the continuum of learning in multiple domains for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. How does play help develop skills in each of these broad learning areas?
- Several studies have demonstrated that toddlers and preschoolers who demonstrate early social skills are more likely to make new friends, be accepted by their peers, and form secure relationships with their teachers and that this predicts later achievement. Why might these social skills have an effect on later academic learning abilities?

*How to Use Playtime for Learning (Slides 36-44)*

⦿ **Recommended stopping point: After Slide 44**

- Adult enrichment of playtime can be as simple as providing toys with different textures, tastes, and sounds or by adding labels to objects for increased vocabulary or literacy skills. How have you supported children's perceptual, motor, physical, and/or social development during play? Do you have any new ideas from this webinar or discussion that you would like to try?
- How might you provide space and time in the day or during more structured lessons for open-ended exploration? Do you have any strategies or ideas to share?
- Oftentimes as adults, when we get involved in play, we can have a tendency to take over and instruct rather than guide learning. Have you ever observed this with yourself, colleagues, or parents? What did you notice in the child's behavior or attitude? What did or could you have done to re-direct back to child-directed play?

**From Research to Practice:** Guiding play by providing thematic, open-ended, and relevant materials or by asking open-ended questions, can benefit learners. Facilitating open-ended discussion by asking questions, for example about preferences, likes, and dislikes, is a great way to support child-directed play.

- What different kinds of questions could you ask a child as they play? Are all questions equally good in supporting play? Do any questions tend to shut down play? Why or why not? Brainstorm questions that you might use in helping a child explore and deepen their learning through open-ended play.