

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

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Explain why playtime is an important part of childhood development.

- Play is child-directed, joyful, and voluntary.
- During play, children are uniquely engaged and motivated, often exploring the edges of their knowledge and abilities. This makes play a unique and powerful learning tool.

Describe how play changes and develops as a child grows.

- The first year of life typically involves sensory play. At this stage, children also develop an understanding of cause and effect and begin to grow their social skills through imitation.
- Play in the second year of life often involves pretend play with a toy and parallel—but not collaborative—play with other children.
- In the third year of life, play expands their social and motor skills. Play now often includes turn-taking and cooperative play.
- From three to five years of life, play becomes more complex: children coordinate many physical actions, imagination, and rules in coordinated social play with others.

Understand how different play behaviors can facilitate academic learning.

- During play, children gain many skills important in supporting further academic learning, including experimentation and problem solving abilities, maintain focus and other self-regulating behaviors, spatial reasoning, and communication skills.
- Play helps children develop skills across domains in the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF).

Identify ways to deepen children’s learning through play.

- Create time and space for free play and use scaffolding and guided play during more structured playtime activities.
- Observe children as they play. Make observations or ask open-ended questions to help them deepen their thinking. Give children time to explore rather than showing them the “correct” way to do something right away.
- Support motor skill development with big, open spaces and fun activities that use the whole body.
- Materials that encourage cooperation, such as costumes, tea sets, or turn-taking games, can help support social and emotional learning.
- Use storytelling and story-acting games to build literacy and oral language skills.
- Support math and science-related play by providing materials such as blocks, racing cars, sand boxes, and water tables. While children are playing with these materials, asking open-ended questions can enrich math and science learning in any context!
- Ask parents about the things their child likes to play with at home for ideas about culturally-relevant materials to include in play areas.



OTHER RESOURCES

- Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center // News You Can Use: Play https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/cde/curriculum/play_news_you.htm
- Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center // Play Space Assessment for Preschool <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/eecd/nature-based-learning/Create%20and%20Naturalize%20a%20Play%20Space/PlaySpaceAssess.htm>
- Front Porch Series // The Characteristics of Intentional, Mature, Make-Believe Play: How Play Influences Development <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/practice/fp/fpArchive2012.html>