

PLAYFUL AND FUN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Play is an important part of childhood that helps children learn and grow. Through play, children learn about the world while practicing the skills that allow them to explore it. When we facilitate children's play, we provide ideal learning environments that are rich with context and meaning. These joyful experiences motivate learning because play is fun, and fun is fuel for learning!

THE TAKE HOME:

1. Play is an effective and natural way children learn about themselves and their environments.
2. Attentive adults are the most important element of playful learning environments.
3. Adults can effectively guide play to help children focus their attention, play longer, and learn more.



WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

- **Play is a part of every human culture.** Play has evolved as a safe and fun way for young children (and even animals) to learn about themselves and their environment.
- **Play provides energy, focus, and motivation** for learning.
- **Play is a spectrum of activities** that includes free play, guided play, and playful instruction. Children learn during all types of play, but researchers today believe that guided play — play that an adult initiates and organizes so that the child can play as independently as possible — maximizes learning.
- **Children play more and with more focus in the presence of an attentive adult.** This is true even when the adult is not actively involved in the play.
- **Even babies have preferences,** and they play longer with preferred objects. Knowing a child's preferences can extend and deepen play.
- **Children enjoy autonomy** and engage in more productive play when given options. While too many options can overwhelm, play improves when children have choices.
- **Play is inherently flexible,** making it ideal for children with disabilities or suspected delays. Play can adjust to different developmental levels and abilities, allowing all children to engage in rich and joyful learning.
- **Play is diverse** and can easily incorporate different languages, cultures, and life ways. Play can promote a healthy sense of identity and belonging.





WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

- **Play environment.** An effective play environment is safe and stimulating. Children should feel comfortable and interested. The environment offers a variety of developmentally appropriate materials and activities. Children’s play deepens when they have choices, so offering a few options and rotating them from time to time is an effective strategy. Think about the play environments in your program. Do they offer variety? Do you rotate materials and activities? Are the materials available to all children? Can children with different abilities enjoy autonomy and choice? How do you encourage families to create playful environments? Ordinary items, like plastic containers and pots with lids, pillows to climb over, or blankets to hide under, are the foundation of playful learning!
- **Responsive supervision.** The most important part of the play environment is a sensitive and responsive adult. Responsive adults can guide children’s play to enhance their learning. This means attending to children’s abilities and preferences, offering options, asking questions, and providing light assistance so that the play stays focused and productive. For example, you might help children remove pieces from a shape sorter to avoid frustration and allow them to do the activity again. Pivoting is another key to effective guiding. Play is unpredictable, and children will often take play in unexpected directions. Adults who can pivot and follow the child’s lead can expand on unplanned — but effective — learning opportunities. Think about the guiding you’ve done. Are you attentive to children’s preferences? Could you pivot more? How are you encouraging families to guide play and pivot?
- **Play characteristics.** Effective play has three essential characteristics. First, the activity should be intrinsically motivated. This means the child engages in the activity out of a desire to do the activity itself, not in order to get approval or to get something else done. Second, during play, the child should exhibit positive affect. This means the child enjoys the activity. Often the child looks happy, but it can also mean the child is concentrated and focused. Third, the activity should be flexible and adaptable. “Flexible” means the activity offers choice so that the child can engage as they wish. “Adaptable” means the activity adjusts so that each child can participate at the developmental level that is appropriate for them. Review the activities you provide. Are they playful? How can you incorporate more play into your day? Are you working with families to play during your home visits and socializations?



TRY THIS!

- Even babies have preferences. They tell you what they like with their eyes and their cries, their wiggles and giggles. Even how long they pay attention to something is a clue about what captures their interest. When you know how a child likes to play, you are in a better position to guide that play toward effective learning.
- Many children find regular schedules reassuring, so set aside times and places for play to help children feel comfortable with the activity. It also helps adults to make space for this important activity. Home visitors can help families find spaces and regular times when play can happen.
- Make sure children have choices during play activities. Use open-ended materials — children can arrange and build blocks into many different shapes. You can also offer choices by rotating materials from time to time. A mix of familiar and new materials will allow children to practice with something well-known or explore something new. Home visitors can help families find materials that aren’t traditional toys but are suitable for play, like the plastic containers and lidded pots mentioned above.
- One way to ensure you are providing children with a variety of play activities is to think about categories of play. If you offer lots of fun materials and toys, for example, think of offering some big body play. If you do a lot of sensory play, consider introducing some art play. Singing, for example. If children tend to play alone, arrange some activities where children can play alongside each other. Mix it up. Home visitors can help families brainstorm different kinds of play. Think through modifications that might be necessary for children with disabilities or suspected delays.
- Outdoor play can offer rich learning opportunities, but bringing indoor play activities outdoors can be exciting and fun too! Stack blocks outside. Put together puzzles on a blanket in the sun. Try finger painting or painting with water on cement — clean-up is easier than ever! Be creative. Put together a bin of materials and take play outside.

LEARN MORE

Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF)

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/head-start-early-learning-outcomes-framework>

Active Play: Health Tips for Families

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/active-play-health-tips-families>

ELOF@HOME Mobile App

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/teaching-practices/article/mobile-tools-home-visitors>

ELOF2GO Mobile App

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/elof2go-mobile-app>

The Importance of Peer Interaction and Social Pretend Play

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/importance-peer-interaction-social-pretend-play>

Play Promotes Early Development – It’s Time for Play Video Series

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/curriculum/article/play-promotes-early-development-its-time-play>

Tummy Time and Free Play for Infants

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/tummy-time-free-play-infants>

Using Materials Found in the Home

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/learning-environments/article/using-materials-found-home-head-start-early-head-start-home-based-programs>



CONNECTING AT HOME

PLAYFUL AND FUN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Play naturally supports learning. Children learn about the world through play. They also practice skills they will need as they grow. Joyful, playful experiences motivate learning because play is fun, and fun fuels learning!

IDENTIFY YOUR CHILD'S PREFERENCES

Everyone has preferences, including your child. See if you can discover what captures your child's attention. Are there toys your child likes more than others? Are there activities your child especially likes? Once you know how your child likes to play, you'll be able to help them play longer and learn more.

LET YOUR CHILD CHOOSE

Children like to make their own decisions, and they play more deeply when they do. This is why it's good to offer choices during play time. Give children a mix of familiar and unfamiliar materials. Do they want to play with something they know or explore something new? It's also helpful to let children choose how to play. Open-ended materials work well. For example, children can play with blocks in lots of different ways. When children get to make choices during play, it leads to better focus and more learning.

GIVE YOUR CHILD VARIETY

There are so many different kinds of play. Simple games, like peekaboo and puzzles, are terrific, and they allow children to work with their hands. Obstacle courses are great too, and they allow children to use their whole bodies. If your children have been playing in the sand for days on end, try introducing them to some imaginative play with dolls or puppets. Or build a fort. Or act out a book. Mix it up and take advantage of all the variety play has to offer.

PLAY ALONG

You are your child's best playmate. Follow your child's lead. For example, if your child wants to place blocks in rows instead of stacking them today, go along with it. As you play along, you are showing your child that this is a fun and productive activity. You will laugh and learn together, and that's the best kind of play.

