

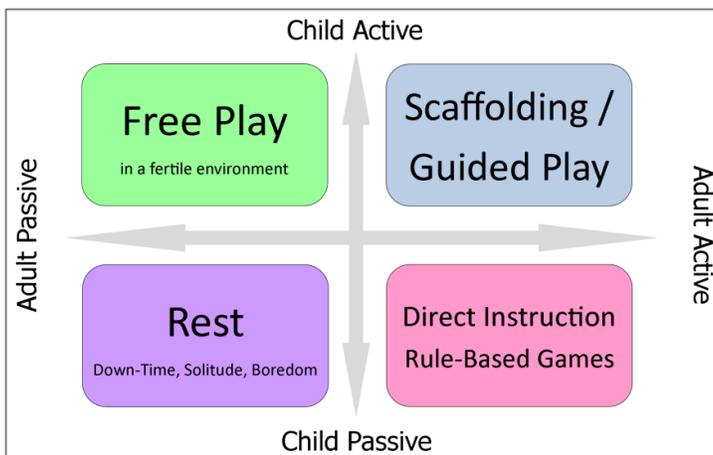
Four Types of Learning Opportunities

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When we think about learning and teaching, we most often picture the sort of formal learning environment appropriate to older children and adults – everyone sitting quietly at a desk, taking notes as the teacher speaks. This is one way of learning.

We call that “direct instruction,” where the teacher / adult is active and is guiding all the content. The student / child is passive – simply taking it in. This is an effective way to add factual information to the student’s internal database – their *crystallized intelligence*. This type of learning and memorization is becoming less vital in the era of smartphones and Wikipedia, but it is still important. This is also a good way to teach complex skills, like tying your shoes, or to teach the rules to a game.

Free Play: On the other side of the learning quadrant, the child is active, and the adult is passive – they might be watching the child play, or might be off elsewhere getting their own chores done.



When a child is given space for hands-on self-guided improvisation (play), they build *fluid intelligence* – what allows them to adapt info to new situations – vital in the modern day.

They may take what they learned from direct instruction, and explore it in new ways. For example, a child who is taking a gymnastics class may practice balance beam skills on a slippery log in the woods. Or a child who learned how to use a ruler at school may use it to measure their Lego towers.

Guided Play: When an adult plays *with* a child, both are active learners. If playing catch, you might start very near to them, then gradually move back as their skills build. You can “stretch” their play adding suggestions every now and then. “Hmm... you build really tall towers but they keep falling over. Can I show you ways to make it stronger?” You demo some ideas, then back off to let them test those out. Asking questions like “what do you think will happen if...” takes learning to a new level.

You can offer new materials, or combine things in new and interesting ways. In class, we create what we call “invitations to play”, where we put out materials for the children to explore. They may do exactly what we expected, or may try out different ideas. You can issue challenges: “do you think you could launch three pompoms at once? Do you think you could launch one through this hoop?”

Think of guided play like dropping a pebble in a pond, then step back and watch learning ripple out.

Rest: Oftentimes, parents and teachers forget an essential component of learning: down time. Kids need a chance to process and incorporate all the information from all their new experiences. For a more extroverted child, they might process while free-playing with others or by talking to others. A more introverted child might need solitude – a chance to be alone for some period of every day to absorb everything. They all need lots of sleep to allow their brain connections to build.

Try to find a balance of all these learning opportunities in your day and in your week.