

# Learning in Play-Based Classes

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## What is a Play-Based Class?

The teacher sets the stage with engaging materials and fun activities. Then children explore through play: observing, experiencing, wondering and discovering. Adults are nearby to ask questions, make suggestions, or play along. Each child decides which activities to do and for how long. Play is spontaneous, fun and creative, and the focus is on process, not product. It involves lots of experiments, trial and error, and repetition which reinforces learning.

## Can a child really learn by “just playing”?

Our brains build connections when we are exposed to *novel* experiences, and then allowed to *repeat* them again and again till we achieve mastery. Direct instruction from an adult can be a great way to add information to the database of crystallized intelligence or teach new skills. But, the best way to build fluid intelligence and strengthen those skills is by hands-on, engaged, self-guided improvisation... in other words, the best way to learn is by playing.

The teacher is very intentional in what activities are available, ensuring that the available “stations” help children grow in all areas of development and build all types of intelligence.

## What kinds of activity stations might you find?

- Blocks and building materials: Kids learn physics and spatial awareness. They learn about sizes, shapes and patterns – essential math skills. They problem solve and experience logical consequences. They try again. They become competent creators.
- Puzzles, shape sorters, and manipulables: When a child works with specially designed early learning materials, they learn important ideas about shapes, sizes, patterns, eye-hand coordination, small motor skills, and problem solving.
- Sensory bin, water table and playdough: they learn to use tools: tweezers, tongs, scoops, shovels, funnels, rolling pins, cookie cutters, and more! They build eye-hand coordination; learn concepts of empty and full, volume and weight; science concepts. They get comfortable with their hands being messy. (This is an important life skill!)
- Art Process / Writing Practice: painting at the easel, working at a writing station, or making collages at a “creation station.” No one tells them what the final product needs to be. It’s completely up to the child to envision it and to make it real. They build finger muscles and pencil grasps, they learn colors and color mixing, learn to recognize shapes and to create shapes, learn about symmetry, balance, and design. The art is a creative outlet for expressing feelings and learning their ideas have value.
- Art / Craft Projects: The teacher creates a sample and puts out all the materials. These gives kids practice with following multi-step directions. It lets them practice close observation skills and learn how to re-create what they see. We also build new skills they can apply elsewhere.
- Cars and Trains, Doll Houses, Plastic Animals. They do a lot of sorting, a lot of story-telling, they co-create with other children, negotiate toy sharing with other kids, and make cars crash.
- Dramatic Play: a play kitchen, dress-up clothes, baby dolls, stuffed animals, or dramatic play scenarios. Children learn to use their imagination, try on different roles, explore other cultures,

role play a variety of careers, and explore gender roles. Lots of complex language practice happens during pretend play.

- Board Games and Active Games: Whether it's Candyland, Bingo, Hide and Seek or Tag, all games offer practice at understanding and following rules, learning how we all get along better when we can agree to and follow the same rules, and learn how to be a good sport – winning with grace, and recovering from the disappointment of losing.
- Books and Words incorporated in other activities: Children learn that letters on a page represent words, then learn to interpret pictures and to follow the development of ideas in a story. They see that learning to read is important and enjoyable.
- Large Motor and Outdoor Play: They build physical strength, coordination and balance and the key skills of running, jumping, climbing, and rolling. They learn to take risks and be bold, while also learning when they need to be cautious, and learning to emotionally regulate. There's also taking turns on the slide, looking before leaping, and moving around others carefully.
- Snacks and Clean Up time: practice at choosing and trying new foods, practice using silverware and table manners, learning to sit with others while eating, and practicing social conversation. Children also learn confidence and competence as they help out with clean-up time, making meaningful contributions to a community.

## How You Can Support Play-Based Learning

Observe or play along: Don't feel like you have to "teach" them. Just let them explore. If they signal that they want your help, then help, but don't just jump in and do things they haven't asked for.

Don't quiz them on academic questions that have a right answer – these questions drain the energy out of the play. Either they don't know the answer, which is stressful for you both, or they (and you) know the answer, so nothing new is learned. Instead, try open-ended questions – questions that you don't already know the answer to. "What are you planning to do next?" "What would happen if...?"

Narration – talk about what you see them doing. "You're putting the toys in the basket. You noticed there's only one toy left. Whoa, you dumped all the toys back on the floor!" This narration tells them you're paying attention and that what they're doing is important to you. Also, giving positive attention to any behavior you want to see more of motivates your child to do it more.

Use your eyes, facial expression, tone of voice and body language to connect and communicate.

Respond to their play with simple reactions "uh oh!", "what's that?", "hurray!" Your emotions (especially anticipation, surprise, and delight) help to attract their attention and keep them engaged.

Stretch the Play: Expand the play by adding in some new toy or aspect of play or offering choices. If they've been using blocks to make a stable for toy horses, put a "roof" on one of the "stalls." If they've served you the toy pizza over and over, ask for a drink to go with it. If they've been using the same old cookie cutters with the play-dough, bring over kids' scissors to cut with or a plastic knife. Sometimes they're ready for this new inspiration. Sometimes they ignore it and keep playing the same play, just the way they want to. That's OK... they're repeating something till they master it.

**Resources: Read:** [Brain Rules for Babies](#), by Medina. Collection of resources: [www.naeyc.org/play](http://www.naeyc.org/play).

**Watch:** Play-Based Learning: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HYNdCK828Y>; The Power of Play documentary: <https://vimeo.com/20964066>