

Play-Based Learning

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What is play? Play can be defined as anything that has these characteristics:

- *Child-Led.* Freely chosen. The child is in control. They are deciding what to do.
- *Process, Not Product.* Play is done for its own sake, not to accomplish a task.
- *Creative.* The child can adapt items, create something new or experience things in a new way.
- *Spontaneous.* It's flexible and open-ended, and it changes and evolves as play time goes on.
- *Fun.* The player looks happy and engaged.

What is play-based learning?

The teacher or parent sets the stage with engaging and fun materials or ideas for activities. The child explores through play: observing, experiencing, wondering, exploring, and discovering. The teacher or parent is nearby to observe, ask questions, make suggestions, or play along with the child. But the child decides which activities to do, which toys to play with, what to do with them, and for how long.

Does 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. This builds two forms of intelligence: *memory* – crystallized intelligence – a database of information and skills, and *improvisation* – fluid intelligence – which allows us to apply that information and adapt those skills to new situations. (Medina)

Direct instruction from a parent or teacher can be a great way of adding information to the database of crystallized intelligence. But, the best possible way for children to build fluid intelligence is by hands-on, engaged, self-guided improvisation... in other words, the best way to learn is by playing.

Benefits – Kids who learn by playing gain:

- *Physical competence.* Free play allows a child to practice physical skills till they are mastered.
- *Self-direction.* The child gets to make decisions, make plans, and see them through.
- *Creativity.* Experiments show that children who are taught "the right way" to use a toy will use it in limited ways. Kids who are allowed to freely explore develop many more creative uses.
- *Problem-solving.* When a child creates their own plan for play, they may not foresee challenges till they arise and they have to figure out a solution to continue their play.
- *Language skills.* Play requires asking and answering questions, explaining your goals to the person you are playing with, and following along when a friend tells you what to do.
- *Conflict resolution skills.* There's lots of negotiation that goes on in cooperative play, because each child comes up with fun ideas, and they have to agree which to pursue.
- *Emotional intelligence.* Dramatic play helps children understand emotions, learn how to express emotions, and distinguish between real emotions and "pretend" emotions.
- *Symbolic play.* If a child can use a stick to simulate an ice cream cone, it helps her later understand that numbers on a page represent how many objects they have, and that letters represent sounds, and musical notes on a page indicate where to place her fingers.
- *Reduced stress.* Play is fun. Children play when they feel safe. We are all more capable of learning new things when we are having fun and feeling safe.

Teacher's Role / Parent's Role

One thing I don't do is decide what the children will learn... That's not the job of a teacher... that's the job of the children. My job is to create an environment, then play with them in it, helping them, but only when they really need it. – Teacher Tom, <http://teachertombsblog-blog.blogspot.com/>

The adult plans an environment and schedule which promotes learning. Children learn best when they feel safe, so familiar routines, consistent rules, and respectful caregivers are essential components.

Play-based learning does not need to include lots of expensive, specialized toys or scientifically designed learning activities. The best props tend to be "open-ended" toys – things which can be played with in a wide variety of ways – blocks, scarves, art supplies, sensory materials, natural materials... A child can turn a stick into a fishing pole, a baseball bat, or a magic wand!

The adults offer meaningful experiences that are stimulating, invite exploration and engage kids. The teacher often has outcomes in mind: knowledge, skills, abilities and understandings children will acquire. But they have not determined an exact path the child must take to get that knowledge.

Some roles an adult may play are:

- *Stage manager*: Sets the stage. Creates an "invitation to play" that combines familiar objects and activities (for repetition and mastery) with novel objects to explore and discover.
- *Observer*: Observe quietly. Be there so if they look up with an "a-ha" moment, or an "I did it", you're there to reflect that success back to them. Observe for at least 3 minutes before talking. Make suggestions or ask questions to extend their thinking, or encourage reflection.
- *Facilitator*: Help get them the tools they need to accomplish their play plan. Help clear away the "clutter" that gets in the way of their play (but don't tidy so much that they're afraid to play! Some mess is a natural part of play.)
- *Mediator*: Help resolve conflicts by offering new materials or suggesting alternatives, and modelling flexible thinking needed for peer interactions.
- *Interpreter*: Help children understand what is meant by another's words and actions.
- *Participant in play*: You follow *their* lead, respect their individual style of play. Don't try to make the game your own. Simply be one of the kids who is playing!
- *Inquiry-based style*. When your child demonstrates interest in a topic, you collect resources related to it: books, videos, tools, resources for dramatic play. The child chooses a project and pursues it. You offer support and suggestions as needed.

A key element of play-based learning is Scaffolding. Development advances and learning occurs when children are challenged to do something just one step beyond their current mastery, and then allowed to practice those new skills. Adults can help them make the step by asking a question, giving a hint, modelling the skill, or adapting materials or activities, and then allowing them to continue to play.

Resources

Read: Brain Rules for Babies, by John Medina.

Collections of resources: www.naeyc.org/play, www.zerotothree.org/child-development/play/

Watch: Play-Based Learning: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HYNdCK828Y>

The Power of Play documentary: <https://vimeo.com/20964066>