

# PLAY:

## It's the way young children learn

A special supplement to the *Children's Advocate*, based on a policy brief from the Bay Area Early Childhood Funders

(References at [www.4children.org/play.htm](http://www.4children.org/play.htm))

**A** generation ago, kindergarten was supposed to get kids ready for school. But now everyone is talking about the importance of “school readiness” before kids get to kindergarten.

That's why many parents, anxious for their children to succeed in school, want early care and education programs to have children sit at tables using work sheets, drills, and flash cards to learn letters and numbers and even starting to read, add, and subtract.

But preschoolers learn differently from school-age children: **play is essential to early learning**. Play is the main way children learn and develop ideas about the world. It helps them build the skills necessary for critical thinking and leadership. It's how they learn to solve problems and to feel good about their ability to learn.

Children learn the most from play when they have skilled teachers who are well-trained in understanding how play contributes to learning.

Most child development experts agree that play is an essential part of a high-quality early learning program. **Play is not a break from learning—it's the way young children learn.**

## High-quality preschools provide lasting benefits

High-quality preschool and child care programs have lasting benefits. Three studies, which followed children for many years, showed that taxpayers saved at least \$2.69 for every dollar spent on high-quality early learning programs, by reducing special education, law-enforcement, and other costs.

In all these programs, “child-initiated” activities were important—highly trained teachers used children's interests and activities to guide learning. Kids got to choose from appropriate activities, rather than spending all their



time following teachers' instructions.

Several studies have shown that children learn more from educational activities that support their own interests and ideas. Some researchers have found evidence that too much teacher-directed activity undermines young children's self-confidence and motivation to learn.

## Play promotes school success in many ways

Researchers are finding more and more connections between children's play and the learning and social development that helps them succeed in school. For example, pretend play helps children learn to think abstractly and to look at things from someone else's perspective. Pretend play is also connected to early literacy, mathematical thinking, and problem-solving.

### WHEN CHILDREN PLAY:

- ▼ **They test their developing ideas** with objects, people, and situations—the key ability for academic learning
- ▼ **They develop many kinds of skills together**—physical, social, emotional, thinking, and language

- ▼ **They are doing things they are interested in**, so they have a natural motivation to learn
- ▼ **They develop concepts and skills together.** For example, as a child learns to write the letters in her name, she is also learning the concept that each letter represents a sound. And she is very motivated by the meaning—her own name! Children are more likely to remember skills and concepts they have learned by doing things that are meaningful to them
- ▼ **They learn from other children** and develop social skills by playing together

## When children play, they learn skills that contribute to school success

### Using one thing to represent another

Through pretend play, children learn to use their imaginations to represent objects, people, and ideas.

#### WHAT YOU SEE:

- ▼ A toddler flaps her arms, pretending to be a butterfly
- ▼ Another picks up a banana, holds it to his ear like a telephone, and says, “Hello.”
- ▼ A preschooler builds a firehouse with blocks.

#### HOW IT PROMOTES SCHOOL SUCCESS:

If children can use one thing to represent something else, it’s easier for them to understand that letters represent sounds and numbers represent quantities. And later on they will be able to their imaginations to visualize historical events or scientific ideas.



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### Using language and telling stories

Through pretend play, children develop their skills in using language and in telling and understanding stories.

#### WHAT YOU SEE:

- ▼ Children act out scenes in the housekeeping corner
- ▼ A child makes her stuffed animal “talk,” telling a story

#### HOW IT PROMOTES SCHOOL SUCCESS:

Oral language skills and storytelling are the building blocks of reading and writing, as well as subjects like social studies and science.



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### Using experimentation and logic

When children play with materials such as blocks, clay, sand, and water, they develop skills in logic. They experiment with cause and effect, with counting and sorting things and solving problems.

#### WHAT YOU SEE:

- ▼ Children experiment with blocks to figure out how to build a stable structure
- ▼ Children count the number of cups needed for a “tea party”
- ▼ Children pour sand into different sized containers.

#### HOW IT PROMOTES SCHOOL SUCCESS:

This practice in experimenting, observing, comparing, and working with shapes, sizes, and quantities forms the basis for understanding math and science and for all higher-order thinking.

### Developing self control and social skills

As children share materials and play together, they learn to cooperate, listen to others, stand up for their own ideas, handle frustration, and empathize.

#### WHAT YOU SEE:

- ▼ Children negotiate over roles in dramatic play: “We can both be pilots if we have two seats.”

- ▼ One child cries and another says, “Don’t worry, your mom is coming soon.”

#### HOW IT PROMOTES SCHOOL SUCCESS:

Many studies have shown that kids with good social skills and emotional health do better in school and are more likely to avoid dangerous behavior as teenagers. Through play, children develop their ability to form relationships with other children and with teachers.

### Learning to enjoy learning

When children do activities they have chosen, learning is enjoyable. It’s based on their own interests and gives them a sense of competence.

#### WHAT YOU SEE:

- ▼ Classrooms organized with different activity centers (blocks, dramatic play, painting and drawing, reading, science, etc.)
- ▼ Children encouraged to choose their own activities.

#### HOW IT PROMOTES SCHOOL SUCCESS:

Studies show that children’s attitudes of curiosity, motivation, and competence are key to success in elementary school.

## The teacher is key to play-based learning

Children learn more through play when they have well-trained teachers who know how to respond to, guide, and extend their play to increase learning—and how to assess their development by observing their play.



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### Teachers can:

#### GUIDE AND EXTEND PLAY TO HELP CHILDREN LEARN MORE

- ▼ **Respond to play:** A teacher sees a child playing and builds vocabulary by providing new words: “That’s interesting. You’ve lined up the animals from tiny to gigantic.”
- ▼ **Extend play:** A teacher hears children making silly rhymes: “You’re juicy, goosey, foosey.” She extends this play by teaching songs that play with the sounds of language, such as “Apples and Bananas.” She knows that this helps children learn to recognize the separate sounds in words.

A teacher observes a child pretending a chair is a car and “driving.” She encourages imagination by asking “Where are you going? What do you see along the way?”

- ▼ **Guide play:** One week a teacher turns the dress-up area into a shoe store. Children practice language and social skills by acting out “customers” and “sales people.” They learn new vocabulary (canvas, boots). They use art to make signs for the store. Some older preschoolers may write letters and words for the signs, or practice simple math by making change for purchases.

#### ASSESS CHILDREN’S DEVELOPMENT BY WATCHING THEM PLAY

- ▼ **Observe the child’s activities:** Seeing a child line up toy dinosaurs by size shows her understanding of size comparisons and putting things in order.
- ▼ **Listen to the child talk:** Hearing a child talk about what letters “say” shows his understanding that letters represent words.
- ▼ **Take photos:** A series of photos of a child’s block structures over time shows that she is learning more about spatial relations.



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## Policy recommendations

Because play is so important to developing the skills, concepts, and approaches children will use throughout their lives, public policy should support early education that emphasizes play. Parents and child care providers can urge policymakers to:

- ▼ **Adopt early childhood learning standards** that identify play as the primary method for early learning.
- ▼ **Require curricula** and learning materials that emphasize play
- ▼ **Fund in-depth training and ongoing education** for early childhood educators, including elementary school teachers, about how to use play to promote learning
- ▼ **Educate parents** about the importance of play.
- ▼ **Assess young children's learning** through observation, not formal tests.

## PARENTS can:

- ▼ **Provide playthings** that kids can use in a variety of ways: blocks, paper and crayons, dolls and toy animals, balls, playdough, etc.
- ▼ **Encourage kids to play with ordinary household objects** like pots and pans and outdoor materials like sticks and grass
- ▼ **Provide simple playthings** that encourage children to be active and use their imaginations, not to watch while the toy does tricks.
- ▼ **Play with your children**, ask them questions about their play ("What are those animals doing?"), and point out things you notice ("You used a lot of bright colors in that picture!")
- ▼ **Look for child care and preschool programs where children learn through play.** Ask: How does this program use play to help children learn?

## For more about play and learning

- ▼ **Zero to Three** has many brochures explaining the importance of play, with tips for understanding children's play and ideas about how to make the most of play time. 202-638-1144, [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)
- ▼ **National Association for the Education of Young Children** publishes *Early Years are Learning Years*, short articles for parents and child care providers, including many on "play and learning." 800-424-2460, [www.nacync.org/ece/eyly](http://www.nacync.org/ece/eyly)
- ▼ **"Time for Play Every Day: It's Fun and Fundamental,"** Alliance for Childhood, [www.allianceforchildhood.net/projects/play/pdf\\_files/play\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](http://www.allianceforchildhood.net/projects/play/pdf_files/play_fact_sheet.pdf)
- ▼ **A Place of Our Own**, a television show and web site with many ideas for activities, check your local PBS listings for show times, [www.aplaceofourown.org](http://www.aplaceofourown.org)
- ▼ **Play at the Center of the Curriculum**, by Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, and Alward, 4th edition, 2007, Merrill/Prentice Hall
- ▼ **For parenting and child care education**, contact your local First 5. Info from 916-263-1050, [www.cafc.ca.gov](http://www.cafc.ca.gov)
- ▼ **For the complete Early Childhood Funders policy brief** including references, go to [www.4children.org/play.htm](http://www.4children.org/play.htm)



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