

Play and Learning Go Hand in Hand

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Does your child's school time often look like playtime? Good! Play and learning are not separate activities for young children—they're closely connected. Teachers intentionally design play opportunities, activities, and environments with specific learning goals in mind.

Here are some of the ways play helps your child develop skills and knowledge—and sets her up for future school success.

How Play Helps Children Develop Skills and Knowledge

Cognitive Skills

Play helps children develop *cognitive skills*—thought processes of learning. These include remembering, problem solving, making decisions, processing information, and learning language. Children also learn foundational concepts and skills in math, science, and social studies.

- › **Math:** When children are shoppers or cashiers in a pretend grocery store or they build in the block area, they count (“I have three pennies”), explore measurement (“This tower is not as tall as the other tower we made”), and solve problems (“Put the big blocks on the bottom so your wall won't fall down”).
- › **Science:** When there's a problem to solve (like making a ramp that lets cars go down faster), children make predictions, test their ideas to find a solution, and try to improve on their ideas. They develop their observation skills and understanding of natural processes as they watch seeds growing over time, and they draw and write their observations.
- › **Social studies:** Children learn about themselves and the world around them by trying out different roles in their play (“Put your arm here so I can take an X-ray”). They develop plans and act on them, and they apply what they've learned to new situations.

Language and Literacy

Children develop foundational reading, vocabulary, and writing skills as they tell familiar stories to stuffed animals (“Once upon a time, there were three bears”) and create a menu for their restaurant (“Write *pizza* first—it starts with *p*”).

Social Skills

During play, children collaborate, negotiate, solve problems, and take turns. They learn to see things from another person's point of view and negotiate when their ideas conflict (“How about you and Danisa fix the potholes? And I'll make the stop sign and hold it.”).

Emotional Skills

As children play that they're at a birthday party (“I'm really excited about blowing out the candles”) or a doctor visit (“Will I get a shot? I feel scared.”), they are able to focus, relax, feel successful, and express their feelings of happiness, frustration, surprise, anger, or delight. Their attention spans lengthen as they engage in play that evolves over several days. They feel confident and competent as they take on roles.

Physical Abilities

Children develop their small and large motor skills during play. They construct with different types of blocks, complete puzzles, and paint pictures (small motor). They run on the playground, dance to music, and learn to hop (large motor).

Play at Home

Toys and play materials don't need to be fancy or expensive. You've probably noticed that children can and do use just about anything as a prop for their play! And the more ways they can use an item, the more imaginative, creative, and rich their play becomes.

Here are just a few everyday items that offer lots of ways for your child to learn through play:

- › **Blocks:** Cardboard boxes can be used as blocks.
- › **Pretend play furniture and props:** Large cardboard boxes (microwave size or bigger) can be made into a pretend stove, a cradle, or basic child-size kitchen furniture (sink, table, refrigerator). Dolls, wooden spoons, and storage containers can be used as additional props.
- › **Water toys:** Small cups, pots and pans, measuring cups and spoons, funnels, and balls can be used in the bathtub.
- › **Art supplies:** Watercolor paints, washable paints, paper, crayons, markers, paintbrushes, old toothbrushes, clay, and playdough can all be used to make art.

What Teachers Do During Play

- › **Observe children:** Teachers notice what each child knows and is able to do. This information helps them plan additional activities and opportunities that will support each child's learning.
- › **Ask questions** that prompt children to think and to talk about their ideas: "How will you make the road signs for the highway you want to build with the blocks?"
- › **Give specific feedback:** "If you move the chair, you will have more room to play."
- › **Encourage children's persistence and effort,** not just what they've accomplished.
- › **Create challenge** so that a task goes a bit beyond what your child can already do, like putting out a puzzle with more pieces or suggesting your child sketch an idea for the structure she wants to build with cardboard boxes.
- › **Help children solve problems:** "Do you want to try the tape or the glue first to see which will work better for attaching the cotton balls to your collage?"
- › **Document what children are doing and saying** to show their learning and development.

If you wonder what your child is learning from playing at school—or if the children don't seem to have many opportunities to play—talk to your child's teacher. When you share information about what your child likes to do and is good at, you and the teacher can work together to provide meaningful play and learning opportunities at home and at school.

"What Teachers Do During Play" adapted from "10 Effective DAP Teaching Strategies," NAEYC. [NAEYC.org/resources/topics/dap/10-effective-dap-teaching-strategies](https://naeyc.org/resources/topics/dap/10-effective-dap-teaching-strategies).

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