



# Introduction

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What kind of experiences best support young children’s learning? In the last several decades, we’ve learned a great deal about how children learn and develop, and research shows that play is a key way they discover, build, and reinforce knowledge about their world (Langford 2010; Tayler 2015). For 3- to 6-year-olds, play may be a child dancing to his favorite song or telling stories to a rapt audience of stuffed animals; a few children running a bakery with materials the teacher has provided based on her careful observation of the children’s interests; and several children playing a card game first with rules explained by their teacher, and then gradually adapting the game with their own rules. Sometimes play is entirely child selected and directed; in other situations, adults provide scaffolding in a playful setting to nurture children’s emerging capabilities and knowledge. Although these examples range from unstructured play to guided play to playing games, all are play, and all involve learning. Consider some of the many ways children benefit from unstructured and other types of play:

- › Fosters social skills (Ramani 2012; Ramani & Eason 2015)
- › Enhances self-regulation and executive function (Becker et al. 2014; Cavanaugh et al. 2017; Christie & Roskos 2009; McCrory, De Brito, & Viding 2010; Ramani & Brownell 2014; Savina 2014)
- › Improves language skills (Cohen & Emmons 2017; Ramani 2012; Ramani & Eason 2015; Stagnitti et al. 2016)
- › Supports math and science learning (Bulotsky-Shearer et al. 2014; Cohen & Emmons 2017; Trawick-Smith, Swaminathan, & Liu 2016)
- › Provides health and physical benefits such as healthy body weight, increased coordination, improved sleep, and reduced stress and anxiety (Levine & Ducharme 2013; Wenner 2009)

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), “play is not frivolous; it is brain building. Play has been shown to have both direct and indirect effects on brain structure and functioning” (Yogman et al. 2018, 5). Clearly, play is a powerful force for enhancing children’s well-being, development, and success in school and in life.

## Guiding Children’s Learning Through Playful Experiences

Play can be thought of as a spectrum that includes free play, guided play, and games (Zosh et al. 2018). Children learn as they engage in unstructured play as well as other types of play, including those that are initiated and guided by the teacher. The ideas in this book focus primarily on “playful learning—a whole-child pedagogical approach to the promotion of academic, socio-emotional, and cognitive development” (Toub et al. 2018). Each chapter outlines how teachers playfully combine children’s interests with learning opportunities and goals. To deepen children’s learning, teachers skillfully support children as they pursue activities of their own choosing and also introduce specific learning goals in the context of playful, enjoyable experiences.

Research suggests that play most effectively supports learning when children have opportunities for both free play and guided play (Honomichi & Chen 2012; Weisberg et al. 2016). *Guided play* experiences provide adult scaffolding in the context of activities that young children find engaging and motivating. As Weisberg and colleagues (2016) explain, guided play has two components:

- › Child autonomy: Children direct their own play and exploration
- › Adult guidance: Teachers set up the environment and use open-ended comments and suggestions to nudge children toward a learning goal while still providing children with choices

As you will see from the chapters in this book, there are a variety of ways to balance child initiation and choice with intentional adult scaffolding that adds to children’s present knowledge and abilities. There are also many ways this balance is referred to. In this book, you’ll see *guided play* and *playful learning* along with other terms. While not synonymous, the terms describe some intentional combination of child-directed play and teacher guidance. Some of the authors present ways teachers can deepen children’s learning as they support play and build on children’s ideas; other authors present playful learning situations that involve more teacher guidance, like math games. Playful instruction looks different depending on your goals for children, the situation, and individual children’s abilities and interests.

It can be challenging to embed teacher-guided, content-rich activities into play-based experiences. In *Serious Fun*, more than a dozen authors—teachers, teacher educators,

researchers, and consultants—share their thoughts and the research on how educators can provide playful activities that enhance preschool and kindergarten children’s knowledge and skills.

Learning may appear to be spontaneous in such settings, but activities and interactions are intentionally designed to integrate language and academic concepts in ways that build on the funds of knowledge that each child brings, reflecting the child’s individual social identities and her family’s language, culture, and experiences.

Carefully evaluating your teaching practices and intentionally guiding children’s play can result in deep, rich learning for children.

The benefits of guided play are not limited to children. As you make continual shifts in your classroom role between leader and play facilitator to best support children’s abilities and needs, providing an environment and activities that are appropriately challenging and flexible, you free yourself to support children’s overall development (see McDonald, Chapter 2).

## Support for Playful Learning

The information, guidance, and strategies presented by the authors of these chapters align with several statements issued by or forthcoming from professional bodies: the AAP report on the power of play; NAEYC’s forthcoming position statement on equity and diversity; and “Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators,” an NAEYC position statement that is undergoing revision at the time of this writing.

### **The American Academy of Pediatrics Report on the Power of Play**

The content of this book is grounded in biological, brain, and educational research that substantiates the essential role of play in healthy child development. *The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children*, the 2018 report by the AAP (Yogman et al. 2018), states that active play is fundamental to children’s health and is an essential foundation for the skills they will need to live successful lives in a complex world. Play helps children learn to cooperate, solve problems, negotiate,



and develop leadership skills and creativity, and it ensures a strong start in language and cognitive skills. Play experiences decrease anxiety in children and may serve as a buffer for toxic stress, especially with the safety and support of a nurturing adult. The report encourages early childhood programs to ensure a balanced curriculum that includes playful learning to promote healthy development.

## NAEYC's Position Statement on Equity and Diversity

As teachers provide joyful, meaningful learning opportunities for children, they must actively work to instill principles of fairness and justice that reflect the goals of anti-bias education. Teachers build on each child's unique set of individual and family strengths, cultural background, language, abilities, and experiences. As they take care not to impose their own personal and cultural preferences and biases on children, they seek to find ways to equitably support each child's development and learning.

For example, the NAEYC position statement on equity and diversity in early childhood education (NAEYC, forthcoming a) calls attention to the emerging research base on implicit bias, which reveals, among other findings, that white teachers view the play of children of color, particularly African American boys, differently than that of other children (Yates & Marcelo 2014).

Teachers must recognize and mediate bias and barriers in all areas of teaching to ensure that all children experience needed cognitive, social, and linguistic advantages that prepare them for future success in school and in life.

Teachers should understand their role in facilitating learning in playful situations and work toward these goals through conversation, understanding the children and families they work with, providing culturally and developmentally appropriate experiences and interactions, and ensuring the highest level of achievement for all children. These early experiences are necessary to help children overcome early gaps in achievement and ensure long-term school success.

A sense of familiarity, ownership, and engagement is needed for children to feel safe and supported. Children who feel connected to the setting, to you, and to play experiences take pride in learning. This is essential to their motivation and feelings of competence. They develop a sense of belonging and confidence in trying new things and taking risks necessary to grow.





## NAEYC Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators

NAEYC’s standards and competencies for early childhood professionals focus on what teachers of young children should know and be able to do to support all areas of development, including “physical, cognitive, social, emotional, linguistic, and aesthetic domains: critical elements of brain development; learning motivation, social interaction, and play” (Standard 1, NAEYC, forthcoming b). Effective teachers understand theory and research and can provide challenging and achievable experiences for each child through play, spontaneous interactions and exploration, and guided investigations, based on their knowledge about “developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically relevant, universally designed materials and environments for early education” (Standards 4 and 5). They continue to learn by working with colleagues and growing in their knowledge (Standard 6). *Serious Fun* offers practical, effective support for teachers to ground learning in play and gain a deeper understanding of their role in facilitating playful learning experiences. In addition, the research and reasoning presented provide a solid base for advocating for play as vital to children’s development and learning.

## About this Book

In Part 1, you’ll explore how extending children’s learning through playful activities promotes higher-level thinking and planning and the emerging brain science that suggests why guided play is a promising approach. The classroom examples and supporting research show how an intentionally created play environment fosters problem solving, creativity, and persistence and helps children meet content standards. You’ll gain insight into the factors that are necessary for weaving together play and learning standards.

Part 2 describes content-rich activities that build on children’s natural curiosity to explore and make sense of the world, examining questions like the following: What does “playful

math” look like, and why is it more effective than worksheets and flashcards? How do you consider and build on children’s social and cultural backgrounds as you plan literacy and math activities? How can teachers use a unique material in ways that sustain children’s interest and grow their learning and social skills over an entire year? How can programs and schools put children at the center of learning, focusing not only on academic content but also on approaches to learning?

Engage with the ideas presented throughout the book, considering children’s roles as active agents in their own learning and your own role in setting high expectations for children and helping them meet those expectations.

When you invite children into playful learning experiences, you are not “just letting [them] play” (McDonald, page 23, this volume). You are creating an intentional, responsive learning environment that is based on your understanding of how children learn, what they know and understand now, and what they want and need to learn next—and you anticipate spontaneous, joyful discoveries with them along the way.

Suggested strategies at the end of each chapter will help you apply the ideas to your own teaching.

## Try This!

- › Use the reflection questions on page 113 to consider and evaluate your own setting. To learn more, investigate some of the additional resources suggested by the authors (“Resources for Further Reading,” page 127). Use the reproducible resource on pages 116–117 to explain to families what children learn from play.
- › As you explore the chapters, think about how you see the fit between play and learning for the children you work with. In Chapter 5, Deborah Stipek notes that “standards provide useful goalposts, but only the children themselves can show you where to start” (page 62). Learn from the children. Reflect with your colleagues, and work with them to implement strategies from this book. Together, you can integrate active play with challenging learning goals in your setting.