



Playing to Learn: Benefits of Play in Early Childhood

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NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Early Childhood  
Development  
Early Childhood Development: Teaching and Learning

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### Session Objectives

At the end of this presentation, you should be able to:

- Explain why playtime is an important part of childhood development
- Describe how play changes and develops as a child grows
- Understand how different play behaviors can facilitate learning
- Identify ways to deepen children’s learning through play

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### Session Agenda

Here’s what we’re doing today:

1. Steps along the way: How play changes as a child grows
2. Playing through the ELOF: How playtime promotes childhood development
3. Playing to learn: How to use playtime to support learning in early childhood

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### What is Play?



Child-Directed      Joyful      Voluntary

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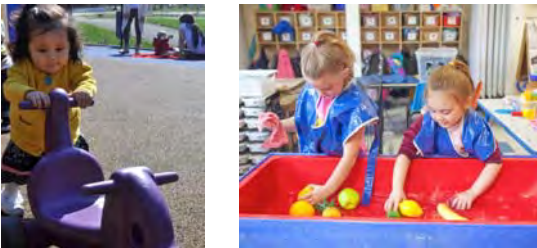
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### Play as a Learning Context

Individualized      Engaging



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### Play Builds Social Growth

- Learn to cooperate through team-based play activities
- Learn to take others' perspectives through role-play
- Learn to solve social problems constructively with adult guidance



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### Motivated Problem Solvers



DeLoache, Sugarman, & Brown, 1985

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### From Research to Practice:

- When have you noticed a child playing to learn?
- What skill or idea were they trying to figure out?
- How was their play tailored to help them learn?



Schulz and Bonawitz, 2007

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### How Play Develops As A Child Grows

Through playtime, children gradually build increasingly complex sets of skills.



Grasping and Holding      Balancing and Stacking      Simple structures      Large-scale structures

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**Play in the 1<sup>st</sup> Year of Life**

**Exploring!**

- with all their senses
  - Auditory
  - Gustatory (taste)
  - Visual
  - Tactile
- physical skills
  - Reaching & Grabbing
- social relationships:
  - Communication



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**Play in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Year of Life**


**Building!**

- physical skills
  - Manual dexterity
  - Walking
  - Climbs and Throws
- social relationships
  - Talking
  - Parallel play
  - Prop-based pretense

**Prop-based Pretending**



**Parallel Play**



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**Play in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Year of Life**

**Expanding!**

- physical skills
  - Manual dexterity
  - Running and jumping
- social roles
  - Comforting others
  - Has conversations

**Symbolic Pretend Play**



**Cooperative Play**



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**Play from 3 to 5 Years of Life**

**Coordinating!**

- physical movements
  - Skipping, hopping, swinging
  - Catches a ball
  - Somersaults
- social relationships
  - Creative cooperative role play
  - Rule following

Rule-based games



Complex role play



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**From Research to Practice:**

How would you play with children using stacking cups in different ways as children grow?

- 0 - 1 : Engage the senses and Practice skills
- 1 - 2 : Pretend play, Parallel play
- 2 - 3 : Cooperative play, Symbolic play
- 3 - 5 : Complex role play; Games with rules



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**Early Learning Outcomes Framework: How Playtime Promotes Childhood Development**



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 Supporting Play: Approaches to Learning





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 ELOF: Social and Emotional Development



Relationships with Adults/Relationships with other Children      Sense of Identity and Belonging      Emotional Functioning



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 Play: Social and Emotional Development

- Resolves social conflicts (Relationships with other Children)
- Learns to express emotions (Emotional Functioning)
- Recognizes emotions in others (Emotional Functioning)





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**Play: Social and Emotional Development**

Emotional Expression

Quality of Fantasy

Verbal Ability

Emotional Understanding

Seja and Russ, 1999

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**Play: Social and Emotional Development**

Emotional Expression

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**Supporting Play: Social and Emotional Development**

- Provide cooperative toys
- Model new roles to play or new social acts
- Encourage knowledge growth through open-ended questions
- Suggest that the children switch roles to get a new perspective

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### ELOF: Language and Literacy



Attending and Understanding      Communicating and Speaking      Vocabulary; Literacy

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### Play: Language and Literacy

- Introduction to new vocabulary (Attending and Understanding)
- Symbolic pretend play (Understanding; Literacy)
- Story-telling practice (Communicating and Speaking)



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### Play and Story-telling



Nicolopoulou et al., 2015

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**Supporting Play: Language and Literacy**

- Put out props that support telling and re-telling of stories
- Add labels to the dramatic play area
- Encourage exploration through open-ended questions



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**ELOF: Cognition**



Exploration and Discovery      Memory      Reasoning and Problem-Solving

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**Play: Cognition**

- Figuring out how things work (Reasoning)
- Finding a hidden toy (Memory)
- Putting a puzzle together (Problem-Solving)



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**Play: Cognition**



- How children spent their playtime:
  - Exploring patterns and shapes (25%)
  - Comparing magnitude (13%)
  - Counting and specifying amounts (12%)
  - Exploring change or transformation (6%)
  - Spatial relationships (5%)
  - Classification (2%)

Ginsburg, Pappas, & Seo, 2001

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**Supporting Play: Cognition**

- Provide opportunities to use math concepts in dramatic play or through games
- Encourage knowledge growth through exploratory talk
- Talk about spatial relationships



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**ELOF: Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development**



Perceptual                  Motor                  Physical

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**Play: Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development**

- Playing with crinkly paper in different colors (Perceptual)
- Figuring how to balance on one foot (Motor)
- Learning to brush one's teeth (Physical)



Pooja et al., 2015

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**Supporting Play: Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development**



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**From Research to Practice:**

- Think back to a recent time when you were watching children play. Based on the information that we have covered today, what skills do you think they were building that you did not recognize before?



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 **How to Use Playtime for Learning**



*The playing adult steps sideward into another reality; the playing child advances forward to new stages of mastery*  
- Erik Erikson



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 **Free Play**

Free Play:

- Child-initiated
- Joyful
- Voluntary
- Active engagement
- No extrinsic goals





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 **Guided Play**

Guided Play:

- Child-led
- Teacher-facilitated
- Active engagement
- Voluntary
- Fun!





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### Teacher Facilitation = Scaffolding



Ask open-ended questions

Follow the child's lead

Explore in new ways

Back and forth interactions

Time for exploration

Co-play

Comment on discoveries

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### Guided Play: Providing Materials



Thematic

Varied

Open-Ended

Relevant

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### In a Culture of Inquiry, Teachers Are Explorers, Too



"As a teacher, I am the expert and I need to have answers to all the questions they ask."

"I can say: I don't know. Let's find out together."

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### In a Culture of Inquiry, Teachers Are Explorers, Too

"I am going to teach children lots of information about this topic."

"I listen to children's questions and model a questioning mind. We explore together."

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### From Research to Practice:

- Think about what skills these children might be learning while they do this activity? What questions you could ask or material you could provide to further their learning and encourage exploration, discovery, and creativity.

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### Wrap-up

- Play is central to children's development.
- Play is an engaging, individualized learning context
- Play is a powerful teaching tool, and adults can help deepen children's learning through play
- Play supports abstract learning and longer-term retention of information
- Playtime provides moments for essential skill building throughout development

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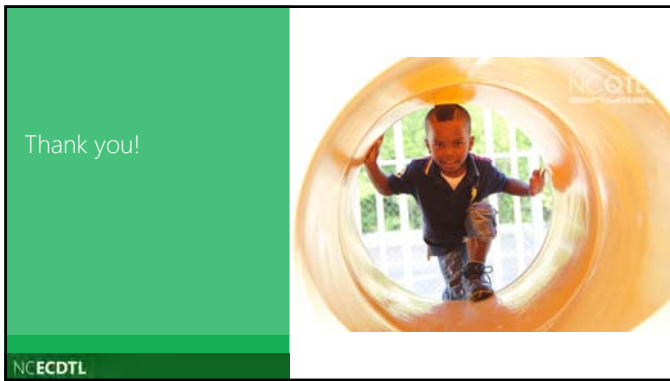
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