

Play is important for the ideal development of every child. Play is included as a right of every child in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Committee of the Rights of the Child, 2013). Research shows, and continues to explore and support, the basic value and positive benefit of play as a helpful approach to learning for young children (Hyson, n.d.; Lifter, Foster-Sanda, Arzamarski, Briesch, & McClure, 2011). The most recent position statement on *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children Birth through 8* (NAEYC, 2009) describes that the initial and long-term benefits of play include development of self-control (self-regulation skills), and language, reasoning, and social skills.

Play is essential for infants, toddlers, and preschool age children to develop healthy active brains, bodies, and relationships (Ginsburg, 2007). Play must be a natural method for learning in early care and education programs. Children learn about themselves and the world through self-created experiences and positive social interactions with other children and nurturing adults. Children need time, space, supportive adults, open-ended materials (encourage creativity), and safe, yet challenging environments. As a result, children develop confidence in themselves; abilities to master their environment; deep-seated ties to and caring about others; and the ability to create environments of love, safety, security, and resilience (Ginsburg, 2007).

Children enrolled in highly academic programs dominated by teacher-directed activities may become academically prepared for the first years of school. However, research verifies that a healthy balance between preparing for the future and living fully in the present through child-centered and organized play experiences; and caring adult-child connections better prepare children for life - emotionally, socially, and academically (Elkind, Clemens, Lewis, Brown, Almon, & Miller, 2009; Ginsburg, 2007; Gopnik, 2012; Miller & Almon, 2009). All children need the support of nurturing and caring adults who understand, value, and provide opportunities for play in ways that enable the access of their inborn motivations to understand or do what is just beyond their current understanding or mastery to encourage growth.

The Iowa Early Learning Standards emphasize the importance of play in learning by integrating play into every content area of development, using examples of both indoor and outdoor play, to show how adults can support children's natural inclinations, motivations, joy, and learning. Play is natural. Play is meaningful. Play is joyful. Play is essential as we engage and prepare young children for their future.

Adults best support play when they believe and practice the following:

- value child-initiated play and recognize that play is learning
- balance child-initiated play with appropriate levels of adult guidance
- provide adequate time and space for infants, toddlers, and preschool age children to experience the joy of exploring and discovering their world through play
- recognize play as a demonstration of what children know and are thinking
- link inside environments to outside environments to provide settings where new knowledge is built about objects, people, and events
- understand that play is not about the toy - but about the act, the experience, the process, or the outcome
- use play intentionally to support children's learning and development
- use play behaviors to observe and document what children know and can do
- base curriculum on play
- use play as an intervention to enable children's progress and development of increasingly complex levels of play
- use play to promote children's positive approaches to learning (Hyson, n.d.)
- recognize that play is developmental and deserves consideration within all domains of development (Lifter, Foster-Sanda, Arzamarski, Briesch, & McClure, 2011)

Families can provide toys to encourage open-ended play. Open-ended toys have a variety of uses and support creativity in children. Open-ended toys include blocks, play dough, sorting objects, paper, and all types of writing and drawing tools that allow and encourage creativity. As families observe, describe, and ask open-ended questions about child play, they build the skills necessary for their children to understand the world and how to interact with others.

As families seek appropriate early care and education settings for their children, it is important to look for environments where the child care center or home provider setting encourages child-initiated play. The schedule must provide many opportunities for children to play by themselves or in small groups, where they can learn from each other. Rather than worksheets, coloring pages, or cut and paste activities, families can expect art creations which are unique to each child. These creations invite children to use expanding vocabulary to describe the creative process and the result of their efforts.

What Play Means for Families

It is vital for families to recognize the importance of child-initiated play, whether at home or in early care and education settings. Play supports children's curiosity and develops their knowledge about why things work the way they do. Families need to understand that through play, their children explore and practice many important skills, including

- + movement of their whole bodies (large muscle)
- + movement of fingers and hands (small muscle)
- + getting along with friends (social and emotional development)
- + solving problems (mathematics)
- + speaking and listening (communication, language, and literacy)