

THE Possibilities OF PLAY

imaginative
learning centers
for children

Ages 3-6

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Introduction

“All grown-ups were once children . . . but only
few of them remember it.”
—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

Let’s play!

Learning centers are the most natural way to organize a classroom and encourage children to become active learners. Centers encourage children to make choices, explore at their own level, engage in hands-on discovery, solve problems, work with friends, use language, and be creative. Centers are also an effective way to use classroom materials, time, and space. Above all, learning centers capitalize on play, which is the most meaningful and fun way for children to learn.

Children’s Bill of Rights to Play

The Declaration of Independence states that all Americans have the right to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” And that means children also have the right to play and live and learn in a way that makes them happy.

- Children have the right to enjoy life and play freely.
- Children have the right to believe that they are capable and worthy.
- Children have the right to hopes and dreams.
- Children have the right to wooden blocks and puzzles and playdough.
- Children have the right to swings and riding toys and sand boxes.
- Children have the right to hold hands with their friends and play games.
- Children have the right to play with toys.
- Children have the right to explore materials and make messes.
- Children have the right to play outdoors for long periods of time.
- Children have the right to use their imaginations and be creative.
- Children have the right to sing and dance and act silly.
- Children have the right to have books read to them—many, many books.
- Children have the right to smiles and hugs from adults who think they are the most wonderful children in the world.



The more you know about the value of play, the more you can become an advocate for children and their right to play. *Play*. That beautiful little four-letter word that is at the heart of childhood. Play is the child’s work, and play is how young children learn best. Friedrich Fröbel, inventor of kindergarten, had the right idea more than 150 years ago when he created “children’s gardens.”

How This Book Is Organized

This book will focus on the following centers: small-motor, literacy, writing, math, science, blocks, sensorimotor, dramatic play, art, library, listening, and technology, as well as activities for outdoor adventures. In each chapter, we offer an overview of how to create open-ended materials for the center, as well as specific activities that will engage children and nurture specific skills. Most of the ideas in this book are simple and inexpensive. You can make some of these center games and activities yourself, ask families to help you, or rotate shared materials with other teachers. We also offer ideas for setting up your centers, organizing how children use the centers, organizing your materials, and helping children learn how to use and return materials.

Before you can grow anything, you have to work long and hard to prepare the soil. Before children can grow into creative, well-adjusted, happy adults, we have to prepare the soil in their gardens. Singing, dancing, running outside, pretending, creating, building, laughing, exploring—these are the essential ingredients that will create the rich soil from which young children will grow.



A vibrant red paint splatter with several smaller red dots scattered around it, positioned in the upper middle section of the page.

CHAPTER

1

A large, dark teal paint splatter with a long, thin tail extending downwards, serving as a background for the chapter title.

What Is Play?





“Play is the highest form of research.”

—Albert Einstein, physicist

Play: 1. noun. Activity engaged in for enjoyment and recreation, esp. by children.

2. verb. Engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose.

Stages and Types of Play

Play is natural and instinctive for all human beings. Researcher Mildred Parten (1932) identified six stages of play that children pass through as they develop and grow: unoccupied, solitary, onlooker, parallel, associative, and cooperative. Note that when children have mastered a stage of play, they will still return to it as they grow and develop. The age ranges listed are approximate; each child develops at his or her own pace (Rymanowicz, 2015).

- **Unoccupied play (birth to three months):** Babies observe the area around them or explore movements and materials with no organization as they begin to master their bodies.
- **Solitary play (birth to two years):** Children at this stage are busy exploring and discovering their world and are generally not interested in playing with other children.
- **Onlooker play (two years):** Children are interested in the play of other children, but they do not engage in that play. They learn about social rules and relationships by watching.
- **Parallel play (two to four years):** Children at this stage play next to each other because they are in the same area, but they don't interact.
- **Associative play (three to four years):** Children in this stage still play independently, but they begin to talk to other children, and borrow and take turns with toys.
- **Cooperative play (four years and up):** At this stage, children begin speaking, listening, communicating, and interacting with each other through play.

The ages and stages of the children you teach will significantly affect which materials and activities you choose. Within these stages of play are many different types of play. The National Institute for Play has identified these seven basic types.

- **Attunement**—This type establishes a connection, such as between a newborn and mother.
- **Body play and movement**—The infant explores the ways in which her body works and interacts with the world.
- **Object**—This type involves playing with toys and handling physical things out of curiosity.
- **Social**—This type of play involves another child or group of children.
- **Imaginative and pretend**—The child invents scenarios and acts within them.
- **Storytelling-narrative**—This is the play of learning and language, such as listening to a child retell a story.
- **Creative**—The child plays with imagination to transcend what is known to create a higher state.

All play is purposeful. There's not a rhyme, song, scribble, block structure, sandcastle, swing, laugh, dance, or hug that is wasted. It all integrates into the beautiful mosaic called childhood. In *free play*, children have the time, space, and materials to explore safely and engage with materials and peers in any way they choose. *Structured play*, in contrast, is often adult guided and supervised. There are rules and expectations and taking turns is involved. *Purposeful play* focuses on the learning opportunities that children develop as they engage in hands-on explorations. Purposeful play suggests taking skills children have to learn and turning them into something that they want to learn through games and engaging materials. Teachers add the magic to turn play into a learning adventure.

The Importance of Play

Play is disappearing. There are a multitude of social and cultural reasons for why children no longer have the freedom to play and to use their imaginations. Many researchers, including Joan Almon and Edward Miller, have addressed the issue. In their 2011 article "The Crisis in Early Education: A Research-Based Case for More Play and Less Pressure," Almon and Miller point out that no research supports the idea that children who read at age five do better in the long run than those who learn at six or seven; instead, they emphasize push-down academics at the cost of time for open-ended play negatively affects social-emotional development, curiosity, and language development. "Well-prepared early educators," Almon and Miller state, "need appropriate guidelines they can apply with flexibility."

Brain researchers, pediatricians, educators, child psychologists, and theorists agree that we must protect and preserve play. Study after study reports that children from play-based classes excel in reading, math,



Playtime is learning time

It might look like children are simply goofing around, but as it turns out, they're learning! Thoughtfully created learning centers are bubbling with opportunities for active learning—whether it's exploring the different speeds of race cars in the STEM center, building a fort in the block center, or playing house in the dramatic play center—and so much more.

Dr. Jean, beloved author of dozens of books and songs, and coauthor Carolyn Kisloski bring you a collection of practical ideas and tips to inspire engagement and spark learning in your classroom centers—and, importantly, keep children coming back for more.

Follow Dr. Jean and Carolyn's expert tips to select and manage materials, facilitate explorations, and challenge children to:

- explore on their own time and at their own level,
- engage in hands-on discovery,
- solve problems and use critical-thinking skills,
- practice emerging skills across domains,
- share and get along with others,
- develop language, and
- realize their own sense of creativity.

Children learn best through play. Discover how you can help them thrive in your learning centers.



Dr. Jean Feldman has served as a classroom teacher, instructor of adults, author, songwriter, and educational consultant over her 40-year career. Dr. Jean inspires teachers across the country with her engaging songs and creative activities that help make teaching and learning FUN!



Carolyn Kisloski, MS, is a kindergarten teacher, author, and trainer who is passionate about young children and enthusiastic in her love for joyful learning environments.


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