

# Play in the Early Years:



MANU CLARKMILLS COLLEGE CHILDREN'S SCHOOL



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## Key to School Success

## A Policy Brief

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Based on the work of the late Dr. Patricia Monighan Nourot and  
dedicated to her memory

Edited by Jean Tepperman,  
Executive Director, Action Alliance for Children

# Play in the Early Years: Key to School Success

**T**he education of young children has been the center of unprecedented attention in recent years. In California and elsewhere, this attention has generated significant efforts to offer high-quality preschool to every child. Much of this interest has been based on new research on brain development, which shows that the very structure of the brain is powerfully shaped by early experiences.

At the same time, this and other research has demonstrated that young children learn differently from older children and adults. It is essential that early childhood programs do not simply attempt to teach preschoolers the same material with the same methods that are now used in grades K-12.



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**There is a well-established consensus among early childhood professionals that play is an essential element of developmentally appropriate, high-quality early education programs** (Alliance for Childhood, 2006; NAEYC & NAECCSSDE, 2003). Play provides benefits for cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and moral development (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006; Elkind, 2007) for children from all socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Zigler, E. & Bishop-Josef, S., 2006). To provide these benefits, play must be consciously facilitated by skilled teachers, who are well-trained in observing children and in understanding how play contributes to the children's mastery of concepts and skills.

Most Americans from all cultural backgrounds are more familiar with "direct instruction" teaching methods based on teaching discrete skills isolated from children's interests and activities. But research shows that

the exploratory and creative activity that young children initiate themselves (play) is the primary way they develop concepts and understanding about the world. Play helps children develop the skills necessary for critical thinking and leadership. Play is how children learn to solve problems and to feel good about their ability to learn.

**A play-centered preschool curriculum is not a laissez-faire approach. It's not the same as giving children "free play" separate from "teaching."** Rather, teachers use the power of children's developing ideas, interests, and competencies to promote learning—through play, circle-time, and small-group activities. This power is most evident in children's play, as play is the central force in the development of young children.

**Play is not a break from the curriculum; play is the best way to implement the curriculum.**

This policy brief focuses on play as an essential foundation for developing children's ability to succeed in school and in life.

Pouring water into different size containers, these children learn about volume and measurement while developing their eye-hand coordination.

## High-quality preschools provide lasting benefits

In high-quality preschools, well-trained early childhood teachers use children's ideas, interests, and activities to guide their learning. In such programs, children make choices among developmentally appropriate activities.

Such child-initiated activities were key components of the high quality preschool programs that showed strong evidence of success in three major longitudinal studies. These studies found that the programs saved taxpayers between \$2.69 and \$7.14 for every dollar invested (Galinsky, 2006), by reducing special education, law-enforcement, and other costs.

Other studies provide evidence that highly structured, scripted, primarily teacher-directed instruction is not as effective in promoting young children's academic success as is teaching that supports and extends children's self-initiated activities and interests. In fact, research suggests that over-use of didactic teaching can suppress child-initiated learning and undermine young children's self-confidence and motivation to learn (Chang, Stipek & Garza, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Singer, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006).

## Play contributes to school success in many ways

A growing body of research shows that every competency important to school success is enhanced by play (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Singer, 2006). For example, high-quality pretend play is related to children's abilities to begin to think abstractly and to take the perspectives of others (Bergen, 2002; Berk, Mann & Ogan, 2006; Singer, Singer, Plason & Schweden, 2003). Connections between the complexity of children's pretend play and early literacy, mathematical thinking, and problem-solving are documented in this research literature (Singer et al., 2006; Smilansky, 1990; Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 2007).

### WHEN CHILDREN PLAY:

- ▼ They have many opportunities to apply mental representations of the world to new objects, people, and situations—the key ability for future academic learning.
- ▼ They integrate all types of learning—physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and language development.
- ▼ They are engaged in things they're interested in—so they have a natural motivation to learn (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).
- ▼ Children develop concepts and skills together as they are integrated in the context of meaningful and playful experiences. For example, as four-year-old Cecily learns to write the letters in her name, she is also learning the concept that each letter represents a sound—and she is highly motivated by the meaning: her own name. Skills have limited value without concepts. For example, it doesn't do a child any good to be able to count to five by rote unless she understands the quantity represented (5 = five blocks).
  - ◆ Children are more likely to retain skills and concepts they have learned in meaningful contexts.
  - ◆ Concepts are developed through activities that occur naturally during play, such as counting, sorting, sequencing, predicting, hypothesizing, and evaluating.

As they design and build a sloping structure, these girls are experimenting with basic principles of physics and logic.



BETTY RAPPAPORT/KUMARA SCHOOL

# Children learn specific competencies related

## The development of representational competence

Through pretend play, children develop the ability to use their imaginations to represent objects, people, and ideas.

### WHAT YOU SEE:

- ▼ A toddler flaps her arms, pretending to be a butterfly.
- ▼ Another picks up a banana, holds it to his ear, and says, “Hello.”
- ▼ A preschooler builds a firehouse with blocks.

### HOW IT PROMOTES SCHOOL SUCCESS:

This ability to use one object to symbolize another is the essential foundation for literacy and numeracy—the ability to understand that numerals represent quantities and letters represent sounds and words (Jones & Cooper, 2006; Singer et al., 2003; Zigler, Singer & Bishop-Josef, 2004).



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These boys are using blocks to symbolize the buildings of a city.

## The development of oral language and narrative understanding

Through dramatic play with objects, people, and imagined situations, children develop their oral language skills and capacity for narrative, or “thinking in stories.”

### WHAT YOU SEE:

- ▼ Children act out scenes in the “housekeeping corner.”
- ▼ A child makes her stuffed animal “talk,” telling a story.

### HOW IT PROMOTES SCHOOL SUCCESS:

Oral language skills and narrative capacity form the foundation for reading comprehension, the ability to produce coherent writing, and the ability to understand subjects such as history, social studies, and science (Fein, Ardeila-Ray & Groth, 2000; Jones & Cooper, 2006; Kim, 1999; Nicolopoulou, McDowell & Brockmeyer, 2006; Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2004).



JANET BROWN MCCrackEN

Creating a conversation for the stuffed animals gives these girls experience in using oral language and telling stories.

These children are exploring and experimenting with materials in different ways, guided by their own curiosity.

## The development of positive approaches to learning

When children are engaged in activities they have chosen, learning is enjoyable because it is based on their own curiosity and connected to a sense of mastery.

### WHAT YOU SEE:

- ▼ Classrooms organized with various activity centers (blocks, dramatic play, painting and drawing, writing, reading, science, etc.), with children encouraged to work in areas and in ways they choose.

### HOW IT PROMOTES SCHOOL SUCCESS:

Research indicates that children’s attitudes of curiosity, motivation and sense of mastery are key to success in the elementary grades (Chang, et al., 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Singer et al., 2006).



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# to academic and social success through play

## The development of logic

Through play with blocks, clay, sand, water, and other materials, children develop skills in logic. They begin to learn scientific concepts such as cause and effect and mathematical concepts such as quantity, classification, and ordering. They practice inventing strategies for solving problems.

### WHAT YOU SEE:

- ▼ Children experiment with blocks to figure out how to build a stable structure.
- ▼ Children compare blocks, discovering that two squares are the same size as one rectangle.
- ▼ Children pour sand into different size containers.

### HOW IT PROMOTES SCHOOL SUCCESS:

This practice in experimentation, observation, comparison, and work with shapes, sizes, and quantities forms the basis for understanding math and science and higher-order thinking in all subjects (Ginsberg, Inoue & Seo, 1999; Ginsberg, 2006; Wyver & Spence, 1999).



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These children are working together to figure out which blocks to use and how to place them so their tower won't fall over.

## The development of self-regulation and social negotiation

As children interact with each other, negotiating the sharing of materials or planning imaginative play, they learn concepts and skills in cooperating, advocating one's own ideas and listening to others, handling frustration, and empathizing with others.

### WHAT YOU SEE:

- ▼ Children plan dramatic play together, negotiating over roles and situations. "We can both be pilots if we have two seats."
- ▼ One child cries and another says, "Don't worry, your mom is coming soon."

### HOW IT PROMOTES SCHOOL SUCCESS:

Numerous studies have shown that children with better social skills and emotional health succeed academically—and are more likely to avoid high-risk activities as adolescents (Berk, Mann & Ogan, 2006; Fromberg, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).



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These children have cooperated to decide what to put in the boat and are working together to carry it to the location they've chosen.

# The teacher is the key to the play-centered curriculum

To facilitate learning through play, the teacher must be well educated and trained in order to have the necessary skills and knowledge about early childhood development, curricula, standards, and assessment. The teacher is intentional in guiding and extending children's play to make sure children are developing in all areas and key learning goals are achieved. Through careful, trained observations of children's play, the teacher can assess their learning needs and their mastery of curriculum.

## Teachers use keen observation to assess and support children's learning and development through play.



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This teacher can assess the child's skills by watching and asking questions as he plays with playdough.

- ▼ A series of photos of a child's block structures over time shows the development of her understanding of spatial relations.
- ▼ Observation of a child writing letters and talking about what they "say" shows his understanding that letters represent words.
- ▼ Hearing a child say "Put all the red food in that basket and the yellow food in this basket" shows his ability to sort objects based on specific characteristics.
- ▼ Observation of a child lining up toy dinosaurs by size shows her understanding of ordering objects and size comparisons.

## Teachers facilitate play through responsive interactions with children, based on an understanding of how play contributes to academic and social learning.

- ▼ A teacher observes two children making silly rhymes while pouring juice. "You're juicy-goosey!" "You're juicy-goosley-foosley!" She extends this play by teaching songs that play with sounds of language, such as "Apples and Bananas," or rhyming, such as "Down by the Bay." She knows this practice with oral language helps children develop their understanding of "phonemes," or the phonetic components of words (Van Hoorn et al., 2007).

- ▼ One week a teacher turns the dramatic play area into a shoe store. Play in the “store” encourages dialogue and introduces new vocabulary (sneakers, hiking boots, canvas). Children practice cooperation and oral language by acting out interactions between “customers” and “sales people.” Children may also make signs for the store: younger preschoolers may draw or make up “writing;” older preschoolers may want to practice writing real letters and words. Some children may want to practice writing numbers to price the shoes. Some older preschoolers may even learn simple addition and subtraction by making change for purchases (Van Hoorn, et al., 2007).



CHASE HARDY/KUMARA SCHOOL

This teacher is encouraging the children to experiment with the physical properties of sand and water—and she’s there to help them put their new concepts into words.

- ▼ A teacher observes a child's play and provides language for the concepts involved, building the child’s vocabulary: "Isn't that interesting? You've lined up these animals from small to big, tiny to gigantic."

- ▼ A teacher observes a child pretending that a chair is a car and “driving.” She asks, “Where are you going in the car? What are you seeing along the way?”—encouraging the child to develop her imagination and oral language skills.

## Policy Recommendations

Because young children’s play is so important to the development of the skills, concepts, and approaches they will need in order to be effective learners throughout their lives, it is essential that public policy promote and support early education methods that make full use of play and child-initiated activities. State and local policymakers should:

- ▼ Adopt preschool learning standards/foundations that identify play as the primary method for early learning
- ▼ Require the adoption of preschool curricula that emphasize play and child-initiated activities
- ▼ Fund in-depth training and ongoing education for early childhood educators and elementary school teachers about methods for using play to promote learning
- ▼ Establish parent education programs that explain the importance of play to cognitive development
- ▼ Require assessment based on teacher-documented observations of children during play. Rule out high-stakes testing of preschool children.



These children are learning the joy of working hard on a project they chose and designed.

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**Early Childhood Funders**  
**P.O. Box 2306**  
**El Cerrito, California 94530-2306**

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