



PLAYING IS LEARNING

In *Einstein Never Used Flashcards* the authors refer to the work of researchers in answering the question: What is play? These researchers identified five elements in children’s play:

1. Play must be pleasurable and enjoyable. Anyone who has watched children playing recognizes the delight on their faces and can see the pure joy of the experience.
2. Play must have no extrinsic goals. There is no prescribed learning that must occur and no expectation that must be met. Only the play matters.
3. Play is spontaneous and voluntary. Children choose to play without someone telling them to do so. In fact, adults who tell children what to play take the fun out of the experience. It is no longer a spontaneous activity and is now directed play.
4. Play involves active engagement on the part of the player. Often the active engagement is with objects that are directed by the child. Children may also interact with others in play. Actively manipulating blocks in some way is playing; building a tower of five blocks during a mathematics lesson is not.

5. Play involves an element of make-believe. Reality is suspended as children sit on blocks turning imaginary wheels, pretending to race to fires. And make-believe happens when children blow out popsicle stick ‘birthday candles’ stuck in pails of sand.

Play has been described as the independent work of children. In play, children are free to make choices and are in control of the materials and the context. Children may choose to return to the same experience because they feel secure doing so or because they have mastered the self-imposed task. At times, the child experiences frustration and chooses whether to proceed with the play or to abandon it, to try a different way or to use something learned from a previous experience. The child is in control and, depending on the stage of play, chooses whether to work alone or with others. While playing, the child’s mind is free to explore and imagine.

To watch young children is to learn what play is and how important it is to their development and to their very being. In play, children are spontaneous and at their most creative. Quite often they will become ‘lost’ in a project, unaware of time and others.

WHAT IS PLAY?

PLAYING IS ...

- Creating
- Having fun
- Taking perspectives
- Reforming ideas
- Discovering something new
- Being in control
- Imagining what might be
- Pretending
- Socializing
- Making choices
- Reading and writing
- Understanding the natural world
- Using what we know
- Learning

The natural unfolding of the germinal leaves of childhood.

- Froebel

Activities not consciously performed for the sake of any results beyond themselves.

- Dewey

THE NATURE OF PLAY

EXPERTS IN THE FIELD HAVE THIS TO SAY ABOUT PLAY.

Play changes and is different at different ages. Infants generally engage in activities that stimulate their senses and develop their motor skills as they grasp, feel, and shake any available object. They use objects in simple ways, generally one object at a time. By age two the child is using more than one object at a time and understands their purposes. This generally happens as they bring their experience to bear on the objects. Children discover what they can do to objects, the function of objects, and the ways they work. By age four children engage more in 'pretend play.' This is a significant milestone. Now children can

have one object represent another – a block can become a phone, a stick a birthday candle. Children are able to think symbolically. Pretend play becomes more complex with the creation of stories and scripts. (See section on Stages of Play)

Play is essential to the development of cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children. Play is so important for optimal child development that the United Nations High Commission has recognized it as a right of every child. The Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) recognizes play as necessary for all children and critical to children's optimal growth, learning, and development from infancy through adolescence. It enhances children's social skills as well as their abilities to manipulate materials. Play gives children opportunities to explore new avenues without risk and allows them to make connections to personal experiences, and develop

problem-solving skills. The absence of play deprives the child of healthy development and learning.

Play contributes to brain development. Powerful new evidence from neuroscience shows that the early years of development from conception to age six, particularly the first three years, set the base for competence and coping skills that will affect learning, behaviour, and health throughout life. When children are given opportunities to develop the multiple sensing pathways in their brain through solving problems during play, they are laying the base of brain development for future learning, behaviour, and health. As growth is nurtured, information is processed more quickly, memory improves, and problem-solving skills are enhanced. At the same time, children's attention spans increase and they are able to inhibit their impulses better. This readies them for tasks that require higher levels of thinking.



PLANNING FOR PLAY IN THE KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM

DECISIONS	THE EDUCATOR	THE CHILD
When?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – decides when children will have an opportunity for play, whether in the classroom or outdoors – decides on the amount of time scheduled for play within the kindergarten day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – chooses when to begin, within the time frame of the school day – chooses how long to engage in an activity
What happened?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – organizes the materials that are appropriate – chooses open-ended materials to encourage creativity, divergent thinking, and problem solving – ensures that spaces are inviting and adequate for exploration – makes decisions about rules, routines, and expectations and communicates these to children – involves children in making some of the decisions for rules and routines – invites children to decide on the materials they will use – in a guided activity such as an inquiry, determines the specific materials that may be used – models, for example, sharing and co-operation and encourages children through words and actions – enters into play situations as needed and as appropriate – observes children and monitors their needs – plans experiences/trips to develop background knowledge and vocabulary to support children’s play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – chooses the materials they want to work with or that they need for their exploration or project (such as something to make eyes on their sculpture) – engages in a creative process – may engage with materials selected by the educator for a guided exploration (such as how to make a boat that will float) – uses language and social skills to interact with others – uses own strategies for problem solving when difficulties arise or may rely on educator support – uses knowledge, creativity, and imagination as the play unfolds – uses background knowledge and experience to bring to the play

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DECISIONS	THE EDUCATOR	THE CHILD
With Whom?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – lets children for the most part decide who they will play with – may work with small groups of children based on needs and/or interests – observes and decides who needs support in entering into play with others, who needs a friend, who needs help with problem solving, who needs support to extend language, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – decides whether to work alone, with a partner, or in a group based on emotional needs of the time, social skills, the need for co-operation (i.e, building a bus with blocks to take passengers)
Where will it happen?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – may determine areas available for playing based on decisions about safety, access, and time – asks children where they would like to play – may suggest or invite children to try something new at different centres or with new materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – may use materials at the centre or choose to take them to another area. Part of the child’s learning is determining what space is needed and how to work within the space
Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – recognizes the value of play and advocates for play as the vehicle for learning – determines the learning goals for the classroom based on curriculum expectations, the needs of the children, and assesses the potential of the materials – makes decisions about play based on child development and developmentally appropriate practice – recognizes that play provides opportunities to observe and document information about children’s knowledge, skills, attitudes, and the ways they construct learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – may create and engage for pure enjoyment and fun – may simply act upon the materials when they are new or different – may repeat experiences to build confidence and feelings of success – may repeat or revisit familiar experiences – may want to extend or build upon previous work – may have a plan: “Let’s...” or “I want to...”



“PLAY HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS THE INDEPENDENT WORK OF CHILDREN. IN PLAY, CHILDREN ARE FREE TO MAKE CHOICES AND ARE IN CONTROL OF THE MATERIALS AND THE CONTEXT.”

ADAPTING THE PROGRAM

Educators consider the materials that are appropriate for children with special needs, such as larger sized brushes, handles for pouring, and construction materials with larger pieces. For English Language Learners there may be opportunities to add photos and props to the dramatic play that are reflective of the cultures of the children in the classroom, as well as the community.

THINKING IT THROUGH

- How does my planning reflect what is known about child development and the children of this particular classroom? What routines need to be in place for the children’s safety and to enable them to access materials independently?

- How will I communicate the routines and expectations to the children?
- How will some of the routines change over time to meet the children’s needs and their growing capabilities?
- Is there a balance between child-initiated and educator-initiated experiences?
- How will the organization of the classroom promote children’s play and development in all learning areas and domains, including physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive?
- How will I involve children in the maintenance of the classroom, the organization, and the decision-making? ■

Excerpted from Thinking it Through: Teaching and Learning in the Kindergarten Classroom (etfo.ca/shopETFO).



“I’m looking for an AQ that combines a great course with an amazing trip!”

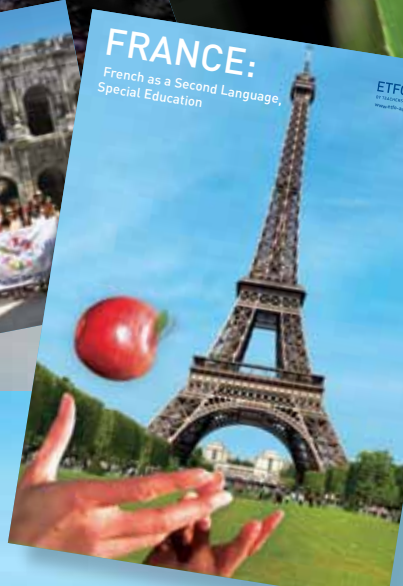
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