

# EARLY CHILDHOOD

FALL 2019 | BRIEF 2

## WHO IS THIS LEARNER?

*"Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood."*

– Fred Rogers

Early childhood classrooms play a critical role in development for children between pre-kindergarten and third grade.

What kind of play helps children learn the best? Play that really engages them – play that they will focus on and stick with even when problems arise – is the kind of play that helps children develop their approaches to learning and ways to respond to learning situations. Curiosity about the world, initiative and problem solving, and focused attention and persistence are a few approaches to learning that children develop through guided play.

Although play may be a difficult concept to define, it is very easy to recognize. Children actively involved in play may be engaged in a variety of activities independently, with a partner or in a group. Because independent and guided play is closely tied to the cognitive, social-emotional and motor development of young children, it is an important part of any well-developed early childhood program.

## WHY IT MATTERS

### Play Encourages Communication

- Play allows children the opportunity to develop speech, language and listening skills. Children talk and listen while they play. Whether this is during solitary play or play with a companion, children communicate to add purpose to their play.
- The more vocabulary children are exposed to on a day-to-day basis, the greater the variety of words they will incorporate into play.

### Play Improves Cognitive Development

- Children who engage in pretend play tend to have more sophisticated levels of interaction with others. More and more evidence supports the connections between cognitive ability and high-quality pretend play.
- If children are deprived of play, they may lose long-term capabilities related to problem-solving, social skills and academic areas.
- The complexity of these skills demonstrate that many areas of the brain are involved.

### Play Encourages Relationship-Building

- Play helps to develop social skills. Children who play with their parents and peers learn how relationships work.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) lists five elements essential to meaningful play that create rich memories and learning:

- **Children make their own decisions.** When they choose how to play for themselves, children experience the freedom involved in making choices. They also begin to see connections between their choices and the consequences or results of those choices. With open-ended materials, for example, children can decide for themselves how to use them.
- **Children are intrinsically motivated.** The impulse to play comes from a natural desire to understand the world. It is this intrinsic motivation that allows children to regulate their feelings and desires in order to keep playing. Children learn self-control through play.
- **Children become immersed in the moment.** In a risk-free play atmosphere, children have the security and safety they need to experiment, try new ideas and investigate the laws of nature. Although they are immersed in their play, children are still able to recognize reality versus fantasy.
- **Play is spontaneous, not scripted.** Often, play is totally unplanned. Other times, children plan their play but then impulsively make a change. This sense of the unknown provides children with opportunities to develop flexibility in their thinking and decision making, which is a vital life skill.
- **Play is enjoyable.** Play always has an emotional response attached. Without this emotional connection, the experience is simply an activity; it is not play. Enjoyment is the direct result of engaging in play. Playing is fun!

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How can you champion the importance of daily play in children's learning and development?
- How can parents, teachers and administrators be the instructional champions for guided play in early childhood classrooms?
- How can parents, teachers and administrators communicate the standards met through independent and guided play in school environments?

## ATTENDING TO EQUITY

"Practices in early childhood programs should promote equity and foster open communication with and between families in the early childhood setting. Play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child. Every child deserves the opportunity to develop to their unique potential, and parents, teachers and administrators must consider all factors that interfere with optimal development and press for circumstances that allow each child to fully reap the advantages associated with play."

– Resolution from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2002)

