



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

How Important Is Play in Preschool?

As preschools strengthen their academic focus, play maintains a vital role.

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Preschool — it's not just about the sandbox anymore. As elementary school becomes more rigorous, so does preschool. Children are expected to learn certain skills in preschool so that they are prepared for elementary school. Considering the limited time in a preschool setting and the pressure for success later on, where does play fit in?

Play is work for preschoolers

Children are playful by nature. Their earliest experiences exploring with their senses lead them to play, first by themselves and eventually with others. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has included play as a criterion in its accreditation process for programs for young children. "They call it their work," says Peter Pizzolongo, associate director for professional development at NAEYC. "When they're learning and playing with joy, then it's a positive experience. They develop a positive approach to learning."



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What to look for in preschool play spaces:

- Do children have choices for types of play?
- Are areas clearly distinguished for different interests like dressing up, making art, etc.?
- Is there an organizational system such as shelving, labeled containers, or cubbies?
- Are toys clean, in good shape, and set up for play? They should be inviting to kids, but too many toys can be overwhelming.
- Is there an outdoor play space, with barriers on all sides, kid-safe landscaping, and a soft surface under the play structures?
- Are adults responsive to kids and open to their play ideas?
- Do children seem engaged and happy?

The teacher's role as children grow

As children develop, their play becomes more sophisticated. Up until the age of 2, a child plays by himself and has little interaction with others. Soon after, he starts watching other children play but may not join in. This is particularly relevant to kids in multi-age settings where younger children can watch and learn from older preschoolers playing nearby.

Around 2 1/2 to 3 years old, a preschooler starts to play sitting next to another child, often someone with similar interests. This naturally shifts, through the use of language, to the beginnings of cooperative play. An adult can facilitate this process by setting up a space for two or more small bodies and helping children find the words to express their questions or needs.

Between 4 and 5 years old, preschoolers discover they share similar interests and seek out kids like them. They discuss, negotiate and strategize to create elaborate play scenes; take turns; and work together toward mutual goals.

The preschool teacher's role in the development of play is critical. "Parents should look to see that the teacher has organized the environment," says Pizzolongo, "and is using her curriculum in a way that guides her to plan for how the children are going to be engaged in play. It really is a structured way of learning. It just looks like a different structure than what you would see in fourth grade."



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Types of play

Children's play can be divided into categories, but the types of play often overlap.

- Dramatic — Fantasy-directed play with dressing up in costumes, assuming roles as characters, using toys to represent characters in stories, creating imaginary settings, and pretending to take on the roles of adults.
- Manipulative — Holding and handling small toys often used to build objects but also found in puzzles, characters, beads, etc.
- Physical — Using the whole body in activities with bikes, balls, jump ropes, hoops, play structures, etc.
- Creative — Using art materials such as paint, clay, markers, pencils, glue, etc. The play takes place in the process of using the materials, not in the end product.

Benefits of play

Through play, children develop skills they'll use in their school years.

Physical

Both gross- and fine-motor development occur through play. When kids play outdoors, if they feel comfortable and supported they'll push themselves to new challenges and build motor skills. Developing fine-motor skills, such as handling small objects, is a way for children to practice using their hands and fingers, which in turn builds the strength and coordination critical for writing skills. "When you're a preschooler or toddler, your attention comes out in a different way," explains Pizzolongo. "Your attention works best if your body is involved, as many parts of it as possible. So children learning to play where they're physically engaged with materials and interacting with each other would work best."



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Language

Children build language skills through cooperative play. Their success depends on their ability and patience in explaining themselves. Teachers repeat the words children say to help others understand. They also teach words about the objects the kids are interested in handling. Students may talk to themselves while playing side by side with other children and then begin to repeat what they hear or start talking to each other. This develops into back-and-forth communication about play, becoming increasingly sophisticated by age 4. Children will now set rules, have specific roles, express their interests or objections, and chatter about funny situations that occur in the course of play.

Self-concept

Play builds a strong sense of self-confidence. Trying to do a certain trick on a play structure or build with blocks is hard work for a preschooler. Teachers acknowledge these experiences by articulating what they observe and letting the preschooler absorb these accomplishments again. There are also therapeutic benefits to play that help all children. For example, understanding that a parent is going to work and will come back at pickup time can be reinforced through a play scenario.

Social development

Listening, negotiating and compromising are challenging for 4- and 5-year-olds. Though children at this age are still egocentric, or unable to think beyond their own needs, working with others helps them develop an awareness of differences in people around them. These experiences in preschool provide a foundation for learning how to solve problems and communicate with peers. Play also helps build positive leadership qualities for children who are naturally inclined to direct but must learn how to control their impulses.

Loss of play later

For many school-age kids, their time outside of school will include solitary time spent plugged into video games and computers, so it is especially critical for preschoolers to have the opportunity to develop naturally in their play.



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Julie Nicholson, an early childhood instructor at the Mills College School of Education in Oakland, California, notes, "We know from decades of research that young children's play is very beneficial for their development, so we have to look at such immensely important topics as the decrease in children's outdoor play, the loss of extended periods of unstructured time for children to engage in imaginative play, and the toys being marketed to children that are increasingly violent, sexualized and closed-ended."

Ask about play when choosing a preschool

When you tour preschools, ask about play philosophy. Preschoolers need opportunities to play, prepared spaces for them to explore, and responsive teachers to support their learning. Such a setting prepares children not only to become students who will work with others cooperatively and approach learning with joy, but also be happier people who will not lose their love of play.