

**AUGUST
2022**



DELAWARE INSTITUTE FOR
Excellence *in*
Early Childhood

Coach's Corner



PLAY-BASED LEARNING

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If you keep up with trends in early childhood education and what is considered best practice, you have likely heard of play-based learning. It is a term that is mentioned often when discussing how children learn. But what exactly does play-based learning mean?

Play-based learning consists of child-led activities with the teacher supporting the play but not taking charge of it. Child-led means that the child chooses the materials and the activity/direction of the play. This does not mean that teachers have to stay completely on the sidelines! Teachers still have a role in child-led activities. Teachers can support the children by helping to scaffold/extend their activity, or setting up the environment to encourage extension of their play.

THEORIES OF PLAY

There has been much theorizing around children’s play and development. A theory is defined as, “a system of ideas intended to explain something” (Oxford Languages). In science, theories typically represent different schools of thought. There are many different theories that attempt to explain play as it relates to development. Let’s examine a few.

PIAGET

Jean Piaget believed that children’s play and intellectual development are linked. He identified 4 stages that each child goes through and believed that these stages happened in a specific order according to age.



Video: Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development.
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/c/SproutsVideos>



Video: Vygotsky's Theory of Cognitive Development in Social Relationships
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/c/SproutsVideos>

VYGOTSKY

Lev Vygotsky disagreed with Piaget and believed that development happened continuously across domains without specific stages of development. He focused heavily on social development and a concept called the “Zone of Proximal Development”, which has to do with encouraging children to try things that are just out of their skill set. This requires support or scaffolding from adults.

MONTESSORI

Maria Montessori is famously quoted as stating that “play is the child’s work”. The Montessori school of thought focuses on practical and sensory activities where the child is free to use their imagination. Each child is encouraged to learn at their own pace.



Video: Maria Montessori: Theory & Contributions to Education
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Q9Ju-kcBIU>



BENEFITS OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING

There are many benefits of learning through play for children and their educators. Children are able to grow and develop in many different areas including cognitive, physical, social, and emotional domains. One imaginary play experience could incorporate all of these domains. Play is a natural motivator for children, and when they are able to choose their own activities, they are more likely to stay engaged and interested. This leads to less instances of challenging behavior and less stress on the educator.

When children are engaged in play their minds are stimulated. This can be a great time to explore some more academic concepts. If a child is lining up cars for a race, you could ask them how many cars are in the race. Keep in mind that we do not want to disrupt the child's play. Look for opportunities to join or for an invitation from the child.

Play also provides great opportunities for child observations. Taking time to observe children in the dramatic play area, for example, can provide rich examples of the following: language, social skills such as turn-taking and working together, emotional skills, and academic skills such as counting, patterns, and more. These moments can also give great insights to the child's personality! Keep in mind that social skills and self-regulation are important in terms of kindergarten readiness.

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INCORPORATING PLAY-BASED LEARNING INTO YOUR PROGRAM

Whether you are an experienced educator in learning through play or new to this concept, there are lots of ways to encourage play-based learning in your space. Below are a few ideas to get you started!

- Curriculum- If your program uses a curriculum or would like to use a curriculum to guide your daily experiences, be sure to choose one that specifically mentions learning through play. These types of curricula are typically less structured and provide more opportunities for child-led experiences. Look for things like process-oriented art, sensory experiences, and hands on activities rather than rote academics.
- Materials- Be mindful of the materials that are purchased or requested for your space. Consider materials that are more open-ended. These types of materials have more than one purpose. Try to limit materials that only serve one purpose, this includes toys that talk and light up.
- Rotation- Consider rotating materials in your space. For example, change up the theme in the dramatic play area every month. This gives children the opportunities to explore different concepts. For family child care programs or smaller centers, consider using prop boxes to store materials for different themes.
- Utilize your outdoor space- Create open-ended play opportunities outdoors. Consider adding blocks or dramatic play items outdoors. The change of scenery could change the children's play behaviors and experiences. Another idea is to have collections of natural objects such as rocks, sticks, shells, etc. for children to use in open-ended play.

There are so many wonderful opportunities to encourage play in programs. It is truly magical watching children engaged in what is so natural for them. I encourage you all to join in their play this month. I guarantee it will brighten your day!

Professional Learning Experiences

[The Role of Play in Any Setting Community of Practice \(Self-paced\)- DIEEC](#)

Resources

[How Play Connects to Learning- NAEYC](#)

[Tips on Playing with Babies and Toddlers- Zero to Three](#)