



What role should I take in children's play to best support learning?



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Reviews of the literature concur that teachers' active involvement, intentions and planning are crucial in supporting children to acquire academic skills, conceptual understandings and content knowledge through play.

Teachers' scaffolding and guidance in play is found to:

- improve the quantity and quality of play towards more mature forms of play
- increase children's motivation to become involved in play
- enhance children's social, emotional, cognitive and language competencies
- increase children's engagement with literacy, with gains in areas such as phonological awareness
- encourage children's abstract thinking and the development of scientific concepts.
- Some research warns against involvement that is managerial rather than enhancing of play and inhibits learning through play. It is crucially important that teacher involvement in play is carefully considered, skilful, appropriate, genuine and sensitive. Teacher intervention needs to take account of children's development, level of play as well as curricular goals, and yet remain in harmony with children's intentions, interests and patterns of learning.

Different kinds of play will benefit from different kinds of teacher interaction, and intervention will also vary according to your goals for children. For example, if the intention is to promote social-emotional skills through play, a more passive teaching role is appropriate, whereas using play to support more academic outcomes will entail a more active teaching role. Your practice will be complex, and dynamic, constantly adjusting to the changing context and children you teach.

Potential roles include:

- **Facilitator:** Preparing, organising, orchestrating provocations, scheduling time and sharing ideas for play; reminding children of their roles and actions or helping children find ways to join in for example, by suggesting a role.
- **Onlooker:** Being an appreciative audience, staying near the play and showing approval.
- **Supporter or helper:** Supporting children to solve problems and responding to children's requests.
- **Commentator or advisor:** Making incidental comments or offering suggestions to extend play.
- **Challenger:** Offering different kinds of challenges to elaborate play behaviours.
- **Mediator:** Resolving conflicts by offering new materials or suggesting alternative plans and roles, and supporting flexible thinking and problem-solving abilities.
- **Co-creator, player or participant:** Entering child-initiated play (in minor and passive roles so that children retain leadership of the play).

- **Play enhancer:** Improving the play (and the learning underpinning play) through scaffolding, direction and explicit teaching.
- **Play leader:** Taking a more active role or responsibility in play in an attempt to deliberately influence and expand children's play.

Principles for teacher involvement in play

1. Be clear about the potential impact of play pedagogies for your children

Reflect on what learning is important and what learning competencies and capabilities you want to nurture or elicit through play, as knowing what you are trying to achieve through play pedagogies will guide your strategies for involvement.

2. Prepare and resource environments to structure play

Children's play is structured by the space, materials and time provided to them. Provide extended and flexible blocks of time to enable children to develop and get engrossed in their play and investigations, and create challenging provocations that promote active, multi-sensory and meaningful exploration, investigation and inquiry. Effective organisation will support children to get to know the resources, routines and rules of play in the setting/classroom, and might include routines for planning and reviewing play as well as places to store play elements for later use.

3. Recognise and draw on children's cultural funds of knowledge and competencies

Recognise children's expertise, experience and interests from outside the early childhood setting and base play-based activities in children's these everyday experiences, needs and interests.

4. Develop a safe and supportive emotional climate

Having a trusted teacher acting as a secure base for children is associated with preschool children's greater confidence and participation in play with peers. Support younger children by staying close to children's play to support engagement and provide inspiration.

This principle for supporting play is especially important for teachers working with infants and toddlers. Support infants and toddlers' play by following infants' gaze to develop shared attention, copy infants' play, and draw responses and collaboration from infants in interactions in which you read and synchronise each other's responses and cues.

5. Take care over your choice of intervention in play

Unintended interference in play may hinder children's creative thinking, so it is important to observe play and match your response to the level of help and support children need. Support can be offered from outside the play (for example, prompting children's reflection about their play) or inside the play (for example, taking a role and communicating ideas to extend play). Think of your role as being a reflective agent for the child's own construction of learning and understanding, and start your interventions from children's agendas, thinking and intentions to sustain meaningful play.

6. Support children's autonomy

Providing children with opportunities to direct their own play, and minimising your own role, is thought to be important for the development of social and emotional skills. Trust children as capable and creative enough to find and create interests and activities and offer attention, encouragement and praise without altering play activities or being overly directive of their play.

7. Scaffold learning

For effective scaffolding of learning, teaching must be fluid and dynamic, serving to strategically expand play and enhance learning within trusting relationships and intimate interactions. Focus on establishing

joint attention and sustained interactions. Provide support that enables children to engage with concepts that are just within reach using subtle strategies such as initiating activities, giving hints, asking questions, unobtrusively prompting or commenting, indirectly modelling, and offering feedback.

8. Observe play

Observing entails an intentional and reflective process in which you listen and respond to children's play, with a view to facilitating the learning that is underpinning the play, and to connecting play to concepts and academic learning to extend their learning both in the moment and in longer-term planning. Talk with children about their play and thinking, as children's thinking about phenomena and events can be used to provide content for subsequent explorations.

9. Intentionally plan to extend children's self-directed play and interests

Take a thoughtful, deliberate, planned and purposeful approach to supporting learning through play to promote learning of particular skills and the acquisition of relevant content knowledge. In child-directed play, you can be both child-centred and goal-directed at the same time, playing with children in order to observe, facilitate and extend play in the moment. However, it is also important to plan specific play activities to follow up on learning and meet curriculum goals. Consider moving beyond a focus on children's interests in order to address diversity and equity issues and promote more equitable experiences for children, as well as to introduce children to content and subject knowledge that is deemed significant or important in relation to your priority learning areas.

10. Teach and support play skills

Younger children and children from diverse families or with additional educational needs may require more support for quality play to take place. Teach play skills by ensuring children understand activities and the use of equipment, supporting children in planning their play, and focussing intervention on supporting the characteristics of higher-level, richer and more imaginative play.

11. Co-construct understanding and knowledge and play with children

Co-constructing play involves integrating children's ideas into activities and projects, while co-constructing knowledge involves creating meaningful learning opportunities to help children draw out understandings and connections between their observations, ideas and judgements. Sustained shared thinking, in which teachers and children engage in sustained dialogue discussing their thinking about phenomena, is widely recognised as an effective pedagogical strategy.

Further Reading

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