

# Defining and Advocating for Play

Knowing that there are numerous definitions of *play* and its role in young children's development and learning, NAEYC invited several early childhood educators to write their own definitions. These pieces are published in the May 2014 issue of *Young Children*, which focuses on play in the early childhood years. We hope these thoughts inspire you to consider how you might define the role of play in early childhood. Visit NAEYC's website at [www.naeyc.org/yc/currentissue](http://www.naeyc.org/yc/currentissue) for more about the May 2014 issue.



**Memo to:** Students in Early Childhood Education Programs

**From:** Stuart Reifel, Professor Emeritus

**Date:** May 2014

**Subject:** **The Definition of Play**

Interestingly, in your educational and classroom teaching experiences, you are likely to find that definitions of play serve various purposes, depending on the audience. I might define play in different ways depending on whether I am doing research, addressing classroom teachers, leading a graduate student discussion, or lecturing undergraduates—such as you. I have been guided by early childhood theorists who include play as part of their agendas—for example, Vygotsky, Bruner, Piaget, Bateson, Sutton-Smith. In thinking about classroom play in particular, Vygotsky's writings on play and, more important, on what he teaches us about how we acquire concepts have been great influences. I think you will find them useful too.

Vygotsky distinguishes between mundane (nonacademic) and scientific (academic) concepts. We grow up experiencing play as part of our cultural

lives. We all begin life—and may continue throughout our lives—with understandings about play that are rooted in our personal experiences. But scientific concepts are based on scholarship, and in most cases people learn these concepts in school. The rigorous thought and methodology of scholarship, including definition of terms, shape academic concepts of play; but those concepts usually do not align with everyday understandings of play.

So, depending on the audience, I use the word *play* differently. Undergraduates are learning that play supports young children's learning in content areas. Teachers seek scholarly explanations of play to support their practices. Graduate students and scholars try to craft new knowledge that relates to scholarly definitions of play. Same word; different meanings.

**Stuart Reifel**, PhD, is emeritus professor at The University of Texas at Austin, where he conducted research and taught about play for more than 30 years. He has retired in California, where he continues his writing and lecturing.

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**Memo to:** Funders of Early Childhood Programs  
**From:** Sandra Waite-Stupiansky  
**Date:** May 2014  
**Subject:** **Why Play Is Learning at Its Best**

*Play is the most important way that young children learn.* Through play, children learn about the social, physical, emotional, and cognitive worlds around them. As they play with adults, they learn new vocabulary, understand culturally determined rules and roles such as how to treat one another, and build important emotional connections. When they play with their peers, they learn that others have perspectives, rights, and feelings that may conflict with their own. Playing with others is how children learn reciprocity and mutual respect, essential traits humans need to coexist in a peaceful world.

*Play is the way that children learn resilience and perseverance.* When obstacles come their way, young children find playful ways to overcome small barriers with persistence, gumption, and skill. When they fall, they get back up. If their creations don't work out the first time, they try and try again. These lessons stick with them for life.

*Play is the way that children stretch themselves.* They challenge themselves to jump higher, build taller, and concentrate longer. They try out new words and make them their own. Children don't need rewards for playing. Play is satisfying in its own right.

*Play is the way children learn what it is like to be an adult as they try on adult roles.* They feed the baby and put him to bed, or build the next rocket ship to the moon. Anything is possible in play.

*Play is the way that children learn to deal with tension and stress.* They pretend to be monsters and superheroes in the battle of good versus evil—and of course good always wins.

So why should play be funded? It is learning at its best—authentic, natural, and intrinsically rewarding. What could be better?

**Sandra Waite-Stupiansky**, PhD, is a professor of early childhood and reading at Edinboro University, in Pennsylvania.

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**Memo to:** Preschool Teachers Everywhere  
**From:** Stefanie Adamson-Kain  
**Date:** May 2014  
**Subject:** **Children Need and Have a Right to Play**

Play is often viewed as what we do after we work. A reward. In most cases, first you work and then you play. Many people work so that they can afford to play (vacations, golf club memberships, electronic games).

However, play is the work of young children. It comes naturally to all children, all over the world. Children are born to play. Play is a right. It expands children's creativity. It provides practice of adult roles. Play is motivating. Free play allows children time to investigate, think, socialize, question, and problem solve, without judgment from adults.

Play involves risk. What will happen if I step here? What will she do if I tell her no? How do these things fit together? Why isn't this working the way I want it to?

Play allows children to express themselves as artists, mathematicians, scientists, athletes, readers, writers, caretakers, leaders, and so much more. It

builds confidence so that children will feel comfortable as they encounter challenges throughout their lives.

Play can be rule-oriented. Sometimes the play itself dictates the rules. Sometimes it is the children who make the rules. Other times the teacher facilitates the play, using games and playful activities in the learning process. Play is prior knowledge expressed actively.

Children demonstrate their learning through play. Their teachers must watch and listen carefully to unlock the play's meaning. Through play, children tell the stories of their lives.

Play creates happiness and balance in life. Without play, how can you discover who you are? Who you want to be? How things work? Play allows children to develop into motivated explorers ready to take on the world.

**Stefanie Adamson-Kain, MEd**, is a kindergarten teacher at the Center for Young Children on the University of Maryland College Park campus.

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**Memo to:** State Legislators  
**From:** Vincent J. Costanza  
**Date:** May 2014  
**Subject:** Academic Rigor = Engaging Play

From an administrative perspective, why should you be the architect of programs that support bountiful and purposeful play? Here are a few of the reasons.

For one, children ought to have the same freedom to tinker, test, and experiment with ideas that any thoughtful adult experiences when the solution to a problem is novel and derived only by playing with a multitude of ideas. Imagine integrating the academic rigor required in the Common Core State Standards with the increasing demands of teacher evaluation systems without being afforded the opportunity to play with schedules, let alone ideas.

Speaking of academic rigor, this term cannot have any educational relevance to children unless combined with the notion of play. Administrators who are rightly concerned with offering rigorous experiences must ask, “What does academic rigor look like to a kindergarten child, for instance?” What rigor should look like to an administrator observing a

kindergarten class is a classroom filled with children deeply engaged in meaningful activities and projects. Some children will be making mistakes, some children will be assisting peers, and all children will have the opportunity to play with ideas. In short, play is deep engagement.

By the way, I observe the same type of engagement described above when I see my local school district’s high school robotics team fiddling, messing around, working with peers, and occasionally speaking with adults. Despite the noise and boxes of pizza that often accompany the workings of the robotics team, would anyone dare claim that the play they engage in is not academically rigorous? Rather than wonder why more children do not engage in play experiences like those of the robotics team, maybe we should design programs that incorporate such play throughout a child’s schooling.

Take a moment to play with that idea for a little.

**Vincent J. Costanza**, EdD, is the executive director of the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge (RTT–ELC) with the New Jersey Department of Education, Division of Early Childhood Education.

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**Memo to:** All Families of Young Children

**From:** Diane E. Levin

**Date:** May 2014

**Subject:** **Advocating for Play at School and at Home**

Play is essential for children's optimal development and learning. Through play children use what they already know to help them figure out new things, see how they work, and master skills. As they do this, children add new social, emotional, and intellectual knowledge and skills to what they already know. They experience the satisfaction that comes from working things out and solving problems on their own. They think and sometimes say out loud, "I can do it!" This is the kind of learning through play that prepares children to feel confident in themselves as learners who see new information and ideas as interesting problems to be solved.

However, all play is not the same, and today several forces can endanger quality play. First, many of today's toys are linked to what children see in movies

and on television. These media experiences channel children into imitating what they see on screens instead of creating their own play. Second, the use of electronic media takes young children away from play and can make their child-created play seem boring. Finally, growing pressure to teach academic skills at younger and younger ages takes time and resources away from the quality, teacher-facilitated play that young children need in preschool and kindergarten.

I encourage you to learn about the ways child-created active play supports learning and to advocate for play and encourage it at home. Play will give your children a foundation for positive social and emotional health as well as later academic success in school.

**Diane E. Levin**, PhD, is a professor of early childhood education at Wheelock College, in Boston. She is a cofounder of Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment ([www.truceteachers.org](http://www.truceteachers.org)) and Defending the Early Years ([www.deyproject.org](http://www.deyproject.org)). Diane is the author of *Beyond Remote-Controlled Childhood: Teaching Children in the Media Age*, from NAEYC.

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**Memo to:** Infant and Toddler Teachers Everywhere  
**From:** Linda Gillespie and Rebecca Parlakian  
**Date:** May 2014  
**Subject:** Play—The True Work of Childhood

Play is often referred to as a child's work. As infant and toddler teachers know well, play is a profoundly important medium for learning and development for very young children. Beginning at birth, play unfolds in the context of a responsive, caring adult—that's you—who sets the stage for exploration by creating a safe base from which babies can explore. Through playful back-and-forth interaction with their important adults, including both family members and teachers, babies learn they are loved, important, and fun to be with. Discoveries made by infants and toddlers lay the foundation for critical social-emotional qualities such as self-confidence, self-esteem, a sense of identity, and the desire to relate to and connect with others—including their peers and favorite adults (like you and your colleagues). Children use these early social-emotional skills to establish and maintain reciprocal relationships all their lives.

Within a loving and supportive relationship, baby's play unfolds. During play, babies lift, drop, look, pour, bounce, hide, build, knock down, and more. They test key scientific concepts, such as the sounds various objects make when tossed off a high chair tray, and discover the function of objects (to roll, to pop up, or to be stacked). Between birth and

age 3, children are developing mathematical concepts, including the concepts *all gone*, *more*, and *less*, and the meaning of *one* and *two*. Spatially, babies are experimenting by using shape sorters, nesting cups, and stacking blocks, and trying to fit their bodies into various spaces. They master language and literacy skills as they learn the sounds of their parents' and teachers' voices, discover the rules of conversation, and act out stories in dramatic play. All this learning during play is because you and other important adults take the time to respond, set up the environment, plan, and carefully observe babies' play.

Play is, indeed, the true work of childhood. When we observe carefully, it tells us what children know and what they are thinking about; what they are wondering, testing, and predicting; and, most importantly, what skills they are ready to master. And then we, as caring teachers, can plan and support their development and learning. Play is a joyful process of testing, learning, and discovery within supportive relationships with parents, teachers, providers, and peers. Play offers a path through which infants and toddlers gain the skills, knowledge, and joy in learning that prove essential to success in school and beyond.

**Linda Gillespie**, MS, at ZERO TO THREE, focuses on babies and families, and **Rebecca Parlakian**, MA, promotes the healthy development of infants and toddlers as director of parenting resources at ZERO TO THREE.

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**Memo to:** A Primary Grade Principal  
**From:** Marilou Hyson  
**Date:** May 2014  
**Subject:** **Why Play Is a Pathway to Learning**

As the leader of a learning community, you're responsible for ensuring that all students advance toward positive outcomes. Fortunately, for children in pre-K, kindergarten, and the early primary grades, you have an all-purpose tool available: well-planned intentional play both indoors and out.

Research and recommendations from professional organizations like NAEYC and the National Association of Elementary School Principals can bolster your confidence in the value of playful learning experiences. Make-believe or role play, playful investigation of materials and ideas, playing games with rules, engaging in vigorous outdoor play—all of these will build knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes toward learning. Participating in rich pretend play can encourage dual language learners and children with language delays to use more complex language. Playful activities help children with disabilities become more engaged—and we know greater engagement predicts better outcomes. Play can help children who struggle with self-regulation become better able to manage their emotions, ideas, and behaviors. And by incorporating play experiences that are well-aligned with the Common Core State Standards and other

early learning standards, teachers can promote positive outcomes for all children without discouraging them from the joy of learning: “the use of play with young children is not specified by the Standards, but it is welcome as a valuable activity in its own right and as a way to help students meet the expectations in this document” (NGA Center & CCSSO 2010, 6).

But using any tool effectively requires considerable skill and practice. You can support teachers' integration of playful learning by affirming play's importance (a lot of learning may take place in a noisy classroom), and by offering teachers in-depth professional development in how to develop children's play skills and make the most of play in a quality pre-K–grade 3 curriculum.

Play is not a break from learning, but a pathway toward learning.

NGA Center (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices) & CCSSO (Council of Chief State School Officers). 2010. “Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.” [www.corestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/ELA-Standards.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/ELA-Standards.pdf).

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