



LESSONS IN LEARNING

Let the children play:
Nature's answer to
early learning

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Play is essential for optimal development

Play enhances every aspect of children's development and learning. It is children's window to the world. Play is so important that its significance in children's lives is recognized by the United Nations as a specific right in addition to, and distinct from, a child's right to recreation and leisure.¹ However, children's opportunities for play and their access to play environments is changing.

The changing nature of children's play

The physical and social environments in which Canadian children develop have changed over the past several decades. It is increasingly rare for children to have long, uninterrupted blocks of time to play indoors and outdoors, by themselves or with their friends.

Since the end of the Second World War, the proportion of the population living in urban areas has increased from 54% to 80%.² As more Canadians move into cities, their children are less likely to have access to outdoor play spaces in natural environments. Technology, traffic, and urban land-use patterns have changed the natural play territory of childhood.³ Parents, increasingly concerned about the security of their children, are making greater use of carefully constructed outdoor playgrounds that limit challenge in the name of safety.^{4,5,6}

At the same time, growing numbers of children are spending substantial time in settings that focus on structured educational and recreational activities, leaving little time for participation in open-ended, self-initiated free play.⁷ According to the Survey on Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, Canadian parents believe that playing is more important than organized lessons for preschoolers; however, more and more parents are enrolling their very young children in lessons and other structured activities. For example, between 1999 and 2003, the percentage of Canadian four- and five-year-olds who took organized lessons (e.g., gymnastics, martial arts, etc.) increased from 23% to 30% and the percentage participating in coached sports increased from 36% to 41%.⁸ What do children learn from play?

Play nourishes every aspect of children's development—it forms the foundation of intellectual, social, physical, and emotional skills necessary for success in school and in life. Play "paves the way for learning."⁹

Play and Literacy

There are consistent findings in research about the close relationship between symbolic play and literacy development and good evidence that increasing opportunities for rich symbolic play can have a positive influence on literacy development.¹⁸

Pretend play with peers engages children in the same kind of representational thinking needed in early literacy activities. Children develop complex narratives in their pretend play. They begin to link objects, actions, and language together in combinations and narrative sequences. They generate language suited to different perspectives and roles.

For example, block building and sand and water play lay the foundation for logical mathematical thinking, scientific reasoning, and cognitive problem solving.¹⁰ Rough-and-tumble play develops social and emotional self-regulation¹¹ and may be particularly important in the development of social competence in boys.¹² Play fosters creativity and flexibility in thinking. There is no right or wrong way to do things; there are many possibilities in play—a chair can be a car or a boat, a house or a bed.

Pretend play fosters communication, developing conversational skills,¹³ turn taking, perspective taking,¹⁴ and the skills of social problem solving—persuading, negotiating, compromising, and cooperating.¹⁵ It requires complex communication skills: children must be able to communicate and understand the message: this is play.¹⁶ As they develop skill in pretend play, they begin to converse on many levels at once, becoming actors, directors, narrators, and audience,¹⁷ slipping in and out of multiple roles.

In play, children learn by combining their ideas, impressions, and intuitions with experiences and opinions.¹⁹ They create ideas about their world and share them with one another. They establish a culture and a social world with their peers. Play allows children to make sense of their experiences and discover the intimacy and joy of friendship. When it is self-directed, play leads to feelings of competence and self-confidence.

The processes of play and learning stimulate one another in early childhood—there are dimensions of learning in play and dimensions of play in learning.²¹

“Young children learn the most important things not by being told but by constructing knowledge for themselves in interaction with the physical world and with other children—and the way they do this is by playing.”²⁰

“Children don’t play in order to learn, although they are learning while they are playing.”²²

“The pedagogical value of play does not lie in its use as a way to teach children a specific set of skills through structured activities called ‘play.’”²³

“Supporting children’s play is more active than simply saying you believe that it is important. When children’s play culture is taken seriously, the conditions which make it flourish are carefully created. Children’s play culture does not just happen naturally. Play needs time and space. It needs mental and material stimulation to be offered in abundance. Creating a rich play environment means creating good learning environments for children.”²⁴

“The skillful teacher of young children is one who makes...play possible and helps children keep getting better and better at it.”²⁵

There are both obvious and subtle forms of learning in play. For example outdoor play clearly contributes to children's physical development. Less obvious is the learning that happens as children test their strength, externally and internally: How high can I climb? Why does my heart pound when I run? Am I brave enough to jump from this platform?

The Value of Outdoor Play

Nature has a positive impact on children's physical and mental well-being.^{26, 27, 28, 29} Parents and early educators must design outdoor play environments with the same care and attention paid to indoor environments.

Natural landscapes in the outdoors typically provide:

- Rich, diverse, multisensory experiences;
- Opportunities for noisy, boisterous, vigorous, physically active play;
- Opportunities for physical challenge and risk-taking that are inherent in the value of play;
- Rough, uneven surfaces, with opportunities for the development of physical strength, balance, and coordination; and
- Natural elements and loose parts that children can combine, manipulate, and adapt for their own purposes.

Although the learning in play is powerful, it is often incidental, at least from the child's perspective. The toddler absorbed by balancing blocks on top of one another is not necessarily motivated by a need or even a desire to learn the principles of stable physical structures, though this may indeed be what is fascinating; this learning is the byproduct of his play, and generally speaking, not its purpose.

Lessons in learning: Creating opportunities for play

Lessons for everyone. Although children learn to play naturally, we all have a role in ensuring that children have enough time and opportunity to play. Children need access to play-environments that support rich, spontaneous play.

Children learn when they play in environments with hands-on, concrete materials that encourage exploration, discovery, manipulation, and active engagement. The quantity, quality, and selection of play materials influence the interactions that take place between children. Adults help by protecting the time needed for exploration and discovery in uninterrupted play, and by interacting with children in ways that enhance their learning in play without interrupting the flow and direction of play.

Lessons for early childhood educators. While children do need time to play without adult interruption, some active adult involvement can be beneficial, resulting in longer, more complex episodes of play.³⁰ Early childhood educators support children's learning in play by becoming co-players, guiding and role modelling when the play becomes frustrating for the child or when it is about to be abandoned for lack of knowledge or skill. They provide new experiences for

children to enrich and extend play, pose challenging questions, and encourage children to learn from one another.

In many early childhood programs, “free play” is used to fill time rather than to promote learning and development. While much learning does occur during centre time and circle time, spontaneous free play is equally important to early learning. It should be a focus of educators’ planning and interactions with children. Early childhood educators and elementary school teachers need specialized preparation to engage comfortably in child-initiated free play, as well as more structured play-based learning experiences.

Lessons for parents. In studies of the use of play as a learning tool, teachers often report that they have a difficult time convincing parents of the importance of play.³¹ Parents, therefore, need good information about the benefits of unstructured free play in early childhood and regular opportunities to engage with their children in play.

Lessons for community planners. When asked, children express a strong preference for playing outdoors.³² A study conducted in Germany³³ concluded that communities can improve outdoor play opportunities and reduce traffic hazards by doing the following:

1. Increasing the number of streets with a 30-km/hr speed limit;
2. Ensuring that streets with a 50-km/hr speed limit have many pedestrian crossings; and
3. Providing large numbers of playgrounds.

Facilitating Children’s Play

Young children need a balance of opportunities for different kinds of play, indoors and outdoors. They need the support of knowledgeable adults and parents who do the following:

- Provide long, uninterrupted periods (45–60 minutes minimum) for spontaneous free play.
- Provide a variety of materials to stimulate different kinds of play—blocks and construction toys for cognitive development; sand, mud, water, clay, paint, and other open-ended materials for sensory play, dress-up clothes and props for pretend play; balls, hoops, climbing places, and open space for gross motor play.
- Provide loose parts for play, both indoors and out, and encourage children to manipulate the environment to support their play.
- Consider the opportunities for challenge and age-appropriate risk-taking in play.
- Ensure that all children have access to play opportunities and are included in play.
- Let children play for their own purposes.
- Play with children on their terms, taking the occasional ride down the slide, or putting on a hat and assuming a role in pretend play.
- Recognize the value of messy play, rough-and-tumble play, and nonsense play.
- Understand that children need to feel a sense of belonging to the play culture of childhood.
- Take an interest in their play, asking questions, offering suggestions, and engaging eagerly as co-players when invited.

The challenge for the future

Play stimulates physical, social, emotional, and cognitive learning in the early years. Children need time, space, materials, and the support of parents and thoughtful, skilled early-childhood educators in order to become “master players.”³⁴ They need time to play for the sake of playing.

In the current climate of concern over school readiness, we must preserve some opportunity for children to play for their own purposes. If play always and exclusively serves adult educational goals, it is no longer play from the child's perspective. It becomes work, albeit playfully organized.

What we can do to create the conditions necessary for children to learn from play?

- Ensure that there is adequate time, space, and conditions for play to develop, both indoors and outdoors.
- Ensure that early-learning environments have an appropriate balance of child-initiated free play and more directed learning.
- Improve the quality and scope of play in early-learning environments.
- Create tools to assess the quality of play environments and experiences.
- Articulate the learning outcomes of play—social, emotional, cognitive, creative, and physical.
- Create tools to assess the learning of individual children and groups of children in play contexts.
- Provide a clear focus in both preservice and inservice teacher training on developing the full range of roles for adults facilitating children's play.
- Promote the value of play and the child's right to play.

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