What is happening in the United States today is truly astonishing. In a society that prides itself on its preference for facts over hearsay, on its openness to research, and on its respect for “expert” opinion, parents, educators, administrators, and legislators are ignoring the facts, the research, and the expert opinion about how young children learn and how best to teach them.

All across the country, educational programs intended for school-aged children are being appropriated for the education of young children. . . . Many . . . kindergartens have introduced curricula, including work papers, once reserved for first-grade children. And, in books addressed to parents, a number of writers are encouraging parents to teach infants and young children reading, math, and science.

When we instruct children in academic subjects, or in swimming, gymnastics, or ballet, at too early an age, we miseducate them; we put them at risk for short-term stress and long-term personality damage for no useful purpose. There is no evidence that such early instruction has lasting benefits, and considerable evidence that it can do lasting harm.

Why, then, are we engaging in such unhealthy practices on so vast a scale? Like all social phenomena, the contemporary miseducation of large numbers of infants and young children derives from the coming together of multiple and complex social forces that both generate and justify these practices. One thing is sure: Miseducation does not grow out of established knowledge about what is good pedagogy for infants and young children. Rather, the reason must be sought in the changing values, size, structure, and style of American families; in the residue of the 1960s effort to ensure equality of education for all groups; and in the new status, competitive, and computer pressures experienced by parents and educators in the eighties.

While miseducation has always been with us—we have always had pushy parents—today it has become a social norm. If we do not wake up to the potential danger of these harmful practices, we may do serious damage to a large segment of the next generation. (Elkind, 1988, pp. 3–4)
Understanding Play: Its Importance in Developmentally Appropriate Practice

All over the world, children play. They play by themselves, with other children, and with adults. They play with toys specifically made for children that resemble toys made for centuries—like balls and hoops, dolls, and miniatures of objects used in daily life. They play with objects they find, which become transformed into whatever props the play demands. They play in ways adults and older children have taught them to play, so that peek-a-boo and hide-and-seek games are passed on to each succeeding generation. They play in ways that show they have been watching the adults in their world, soothing pretend babies or hunting with small bows and arrows. They play using words barely mumbled to themselves or using stylized dialogue in which they prompt one another. They play joyfully, spontaneously, and using elaborate rules easily recognized by the generations who played similar games before them. They begin playing when they’re just babies, and they’re still playing when they’re supposed to be concentrating on schoolwork. Children’s play is recognized as an inseparable part of childhood.

The universality of children’s play has attracted the attention of countless researchers and theorists over the years. Although these researchers have differed in some of their basic assumptions about play, all have agreed that play is significant in the development of children physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively. Montessori was the first to say “Play is the child’s work.” This solemn phrase is repeated frequently to describe play’s importance. In this chapter, we will try to go beyond that cliché, to understand why play is considered the heart of developmentally appropriate practice.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, students should be able to
- define play and describe its key elements.
- describe categories and social stages of play.
- describe major theories about how play affects development.
- identify reasons why play is the most developmentally appropriate curriculum method.
- discuss conditions that support play.
- discuss current issues regarding play, including violent play, cultural influences on play, play for children with special needs, play and early learning standards, and helping families understand and accept the power of play.
WHAT IS PLAY?

Play has been defined in a variety of ways, depending on the perspective of the researcher/theorist or the participant. When children are asked what constitutes play, they refer to it as pleasurable and self-selected (Monighan-Nourot, 2003). Characteristics noted by researchers in defining play include these.

- Play is intrinsically motivated and spontaneous; individuals want to play. While this statement may not apply to all children with special needs or developmental delays, generally the urge to play seems innate.
- Play involves nonliteral or symbolic activity; creativity and imagination are involved in play.
- Play actively engages children; children become lost in their own worlds of playful activity.
- The goals of play are flexible, self-imposed, and may change during the course of the play; children are not bound by rules in their play, which may take many directions.
- In play, attention is on the means rather than a particular end—process-oriented rather than product-oriented; the play is important in and of itself, no matter what results from the play (Monighan-Nourot, 1990; Trawick-Smith, 1994; Stone, 1995).

Fromberg (2002) adds the words meaningful, episodic, and rule-governed (more about rule-governed when we consider Vygotsky later in this chapter). An early theorist talked about a continuum between play and work with particular components necessary to define an activity as play (Dewey, 1916). An interesting additional idea about play is that it integrates and unifies “apparently paradoxical properties” (Monighan-Nourot, 2003, p. 130), which allows for the opposing ideas of play being both pleasurable and frustrating or difficult.

Thus, a definition of play includes the ideas of pleasure, self-imposed ideas and spontaneous activities, and activity not restricted by reality or instruction. Monighan-Nourot (2003) defines play as involving an integration of experience, symbolic meanings, and paradoxes.

This definition excludes some forms of activity frequently seen in early childhood classrooms. For example, when the teacher gives directions for activities to children using colored wooden cubes to place on patterns, this is certainly hands-on and active, with a particular goal in mind, but the activity is not self-selected or intrinsically motivated. Similarly, when children in Montessori classrooms are using materials in ways specifically taught by teachers, the children may experience pleasure, but the other characteristics of play are missing. Finally, when teachers assign children roles in dramatic play (“You can be the Big Billy Goat Gruff”), this is not true play. Alternatively, when children (or adults) elect to engage in activity that might seem like work, such as writing a story or working on a math problem, they may be engaging in play, because the activity is freely chosen, pleasurable, and process-oriented (Trawick-Smith, 1994). Think of other examples that could be defined as either play or work, depending on the circumstances.

Very young children play. Babies enjoy interaction first with their own bodies and then with the materials they are given by adults. They play with the people around them, loving the repetition, surprise, and joy of the interaction. The element of symbolism may be missing from their play, but we can recognize the aspects of freely chosen, pleasurable activity in their play.

As we continue to define play, it is important to note the different categories and stages of play.

CATEGORIES OF PLAY

Piaget’s cognitive theory of intellectual development (1962) identified different categories of play based on observations of his own children, later adapted by Smilansky (1968). The three categories of play are

- functional,
- symbolic,
- games with rules.
These categories coincide with certain cognitive developmental stages, although they continue in some form throughout development. Piaget believed that children’s play evolves through these stages as their mental structures change.

### Functional Play

Functional play, also called sensorimotor or practice play, is most common in children in the first two years of life, although it is obvious in all later stages as well. Children repeatedly practice their mental schemes by interacting with objects, people, and language. Children derive great pleasure from the movement and sensory exploration involved in playing in their environment.

Functional play is seen when
- babies explore bead toys by moving the beads over and over. (See Figure 2-1.)
- toddlers climb on every available object.
- four-year-olds finish a puzzle and then immediately dump out the pieces to begin again.
- six-year-olds roller skate every waking minute.

Through such practice play, children acquire confidence in their physical skills. Again, this is the predominant form of play for infants and young toddlers.

### Symbolic Play

Symbolic play, or representational play, appears at about age two and continues in various forms into adulthood. Symbolic play includes constructive play and dramatic play.

**Constructive Play.** Children using materials or objects to make other things are engaging in constructive play (see Figure 2-2). Constructive play is a link between functional play and more sophisticated symbolic play. Children create and construct by using concrete materials to form representations of objects. Examples of constructive play include
- a two-year-old stacking three large blocks and saying, “My house.”
- a three-year-old constructing a tall Lego tower.
- a five-year-old carefully selecting markers to illustrate his trip to the farm.
- a seven-year-old working for long hours to create a clay model of a spaceship.

**Dramatic Play.** Children creating imaginary roles in which they pretend to be someone or something else are engaging in dramatic play. The play often draws on first- or secondhand experience in various familiar situations. When two or more children are involved, such play is designated as sociodramatic play, (see Figure 2-3) and the play proceeds based on the interaction between the players acting out the roles and negotiating the pretend themes (Smilansky, 1990).

Dramatic play may also involve constructing pretend objects, although the representation may be far more abstract than in constructive play. For example, the child who puts detail into constructing a tower may then represent it by saying, “Pretend we’re up really high in my tower here, okay?” gesturing as though he’s having to maintain his balance carefully.

Learning to master symbolic play through both constructive and dramatic play is the major task of preschoolers; this is what clearly differentiates their play from toddler play. Symbolic play
lays the foundations for literacy development and representational abstract thought, as we will discuss later in the chapter.

To become a master player is the height of developmental achievement for children ages 3 to 5. Master players are skilled at representing their experiences symbolically in self-initiated improvisational drama. Sometimes alone, sometimes in collaboration with others, they play out their fantasies and the events of their daily lives. Through pretend play, young children consolidate their understanding of the world, their language, and their social skills. (Jones & Reynolds, 1992, p. 1)

**Dramatic play is seen when**

- an older toddler holds a block to her ear and says, “Hello.”
- a three-year-old carefully carries a pegboard filled with pegs over to the teacher, singing “Happy Birthday.”
- a four-year-old manipulates small figures in and out of a house, talking for each character.

**Sociodramatic play is seen when**

- several five-year-olds play shoe shop, with one child playing the role of the store clerk and two others coming to try on shoes.
• one child says to another, “You can be the mother now, okay, and I’ll be the big sister getting ready for my date.”

Games with Rules

Games with rules become part of the play of school-age children and beyond. This play depends on children’s understanding and agreement to use a set of prearranged rules. Logical thinking and social controls and skills are necessary for this stage of becoming “serious players” (Wasserman, 2000). Sometimes, the games are formally named and recognized; at other times, they involve simple play pacts between children, who establish their own informal sets of rules on the spot. In both cases, being able to play games with rules is contingent on concrete mental operations that enable children to reason logically and understand order in the world.

Ability to play games with rules is seen when
• a group of seven-year-olds chooses teams for a game of kickball.
• two six-year-olds play a game of checkers in which they have decided that each player may move twice in a row.
• the after-school program has abundant equipment to encourage various ball games.
• the neighborhood group using the bike ramp for jumps decides that those who jump the highest get to go first next turn.

SOCIAL STAGES OF PLAY

In a now-classic study of children’s social participation in play, Parten (1932) described various stages in children’s social behavior. These stages are described in the following sections.

Onlooker Behavior

The child who simply watches others at play is engaging in onlooker behavior. Onlookers may be children who are reluctant to join others or who are learning to play by watching others (Anderson, 2002).

Three children are digging a hole together in the sandbox. A fourth child sits nearby, watching.

Solitary Play

The child who plays alone, without any overt interaction with others, is engaging in solitary play (see Figure 2-4). This play is often typical of young and inexperienced players, although older children who undertake complex pretend play or remove themselves from the play of others also engage in it.

Two-year-old Renata sits on the floor, fitting together a collection of rings.

Five-year-old Pietra sits on the floor with an assortment of farm animals and figures arranged around her and small block buildings for each group.

Parallel Play

Parallel play is seen when children share materials or play near each other without attempting to coordinate or connect their play. Children engaging in parallel play do not acknowledge the play of others. This kind of play may be a precursor to group play.
Two boys sit on the carpet pushing toy cars. Both make car sounds with their mouths, but neither looks at the other.

Two children are coloring with markers. When one puts down the red marker, the other picks it up. No words are spoken.

**Associative Group Play**

*Associative group play* is the first kind of group play differentiated by Parten. This type of play occurs when children are involved in similar activities near each other, perhaps sharing materials, but without committing to a joint focus in their play. Some interaction occurs between the children.

Two children digging in the sand agree that each can use one of the dump trucks, but each child continues digging her own hole.

**Cooperative Play**

*Cooperative play* is the second form of group play and represents real efforts to negotiate play themes and roles with peers. Conversation among the players establishes the roles and events of the play.

“Okay, but pretend that the baby got real sick, and you have to take her to the doctor real quick.”

“Okay, then you better get the car.” The players then resume their play roles of mother and father.

Understanding the terminology introduced in this section will help teachers and students identify the categories and stages of children’s play, a necessary first step to understanding how best to support the play. Before considering teacher support, however, it is important to understand the theoretical basis of learning through play.

**THEORIES OF PLAY AND DEVELOPMENT**

Major perspectives influencing our understanding of play derive from well-known theorists. Piaget and Vygotsky, the two theorists whose ideas have dominated the field of research on play during the past sixty years or so, have different perspectives concerning how play influences cognitive development, but both find that play is the vehicle for children’s construction of knowledge. First we will consider their separate perspectives on play and cognitive development.

**Piaget and Play**

Piaget believed that learning takes place through constructivist processes. This means that knowledge is not acquired by taking in information from the environment or imitating the actions of others, but by building knowledge and skills through a slow, continuous process of construction, modifying the understandings that children bring to each situation. Two processes, *assimilation* (taking in information and using it for one’s own pleasure without adapting one’s thinking to it) and *accommodation* (adapting current levels of thinking or *schema* to take new information into account), allow children to make changes in their mental models, that is, to intelligently adapt. As children play, Piaget believed, they encounter (assimilate) new things and ideas. When the new information or situation doesn’t fit what they already know, children experience confusion (*disequilibrium*). They try to master the new idea by adjusting their current ideas (accommodating) to the new idea, thus learning something new and reaching a new level.
Piaget believed that play is primarily an assimilatory activity (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Kagan, 1990), in which children can integrate the reality around them into their mental structures, practice newly formed representational ideas, and construct meaning from their experience. In the play, children “intuitively express elements of an experience or situation that do not fit neatly into already developed structures for interpreting and expressing meaning. In reflecting on their play . . . children formulate their inquiry” (Monighan-Nourot, 2003, p. 134). Even when children play with others, the play is primarily carried out as part of an individual child’s developmental growth.

Piaget pointed out that young children need three basic kinds of knowledge: physical, logical-mathematical, and social. Children obtain physical knowledge from activities that allow them to observe and draw conclusions about the physical properties of objects (see Figure 2-5). For example, through play, children discover that cars roll quickly down an incline and that heavy objects sink in water. Children develop logical-mathematical knowledge as they discover relationships among objects, people, and ideas. A child playing with blocks discovers that placing a longer one on the bottom provides a sturdier base than a shorter one. Play offers children the experiences necessary to construct these kinds of knowledge. Other people teach social knowledge directly, as children learn cultural and societal customs and expected behavior. Nevertheless, play experiences with others allow children to apply the ideas they have learned in social situations. The preschool child develops the three kinds of knowledge by using spontaneous oral language, tools, and materials for creative expression and investigation.

Piaget noted that the development of symbolic or abstract thought is the major aspect of intellectual development in the early childhood years. The ability to transform objects, through pretend play, into a meaning different from the original reality denotes the beginning of representational thought. To think abstractly, children must be able to separate their actions in the here and now from the mental representations of those actions. Successively, through repeated rich play experiences, children grow in the stages of symbolic play. “Children’s ability to enter ‘as if’ frames and to negotiate with others within those frames marks the human capacity to enter wholly mental realms of experience in the real world” (Monighan-Nourot, 2003, p. 134).

Piaget found another condition to promote cognitive restructuring in play in which children cooperate and interact with others. When children argue and disagree with peers, this conflict jars them into noticing that others hold different worldviews from their own (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Thus, in Piaget’s view, contact with other children at play is important for a decline in the egocentric thinking that characterizes the preschool years (Piaget, [1923] 1926).
Vygotsky and Play

A Russian psychologist studying the relationship of social experience to children’s learning about the same time as Piaget also had a constructivist approach, but with a difference. Rather than positing, as did Piaget, that children’s increasing maturity and brain development allowed them to refigure their own mental processes, Vygotsky believed that the increasingly complex mental activities of the child were derived from social and cultural contexts. That is, social engagement and collaboration with others is the powerful force that transforms children’s thinking. “According to Vygotsky ([1930–1935] 1978), through cooperative dialogues with more knowledgeable members of their society during challenging tasks, children learn to think and behave in ways that reflect their community’s culture” (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 19). The key element in collaborating with more mature peers or adults is not conflict, as Piaget saw, but rather “the extent to which differences of opinion are resolved, responsibility is shared, and discourse reflects cooperation and mutual respect” (p. 20). This guided participation, or scaffolding (see Figure 2-6), will be discussed later in this chapter as we consider the roles of adults in supporting play.

Vygotsky wrote only twelve pages on play (Vygotsky, [1930–1935] 1978), focusing on the importance of representational play during the preschool years. Fantasy play occupied an important place in his theory of cognitive development. In Vygotsky’s words:

Play creates a **zone of proximal development** in the child. In play, the child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development. (Vygotsky, [1930–1935] 1978, p. 102)

The **zone of proximal development** cited by Vygotsky is the distance between the child’s actual developmental level of independent problem solving and the potential developmental level of problem solving with adult guidance or working with more capable peers. (The zone of proximal development will be discussed more in later chapters.) Vygotsky believed education precedes development—that through guidance and support, children actively construct new cognitive abilities.

Vygotsky identified two critical features of play that indicate play’s uniqueness and its role in development. (Interestingly, he differed from Piaget in highlighting play’s symbolic features, noting that symbolism is not exclusive to play.) The first feature is that pretend play creates an imaginary situation that “permits the child to grapple with unrealizable desires” (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 53). Play first appears at the time when caregivers are insisting that toddlers postpone gratification of their desires and adopt socially desirable behaviors. Children see one situation, but act differently in relation to what they see; they rely on ideas to guide their behavior, not on the stimuli of the surrounding world. Their ability to use object substitutions in imaginative play is critical to this process. When a child uses a stick to represent a horse, the stick becomes a way to separate the meaning of the word (symbol) horse from a real horse. This use of a pivot object allows a separation of meaning that is critical to relying on abstract thought to guide behavior.

The second feature of symbolic play is that it contains rules for behavior that children must follow to successfully play the pretend scene. (This view is apart from that of researchers who define play as free of rules, although play rules are imposed by children based on their understanding of how things should be.) Imaginary situations are governed by the rules the child has learned in social contexts, as in rules or customary behaviors for playing house: “No, first you have to go to work, and then you can have dinner.” As children play together, they are working out meanings that relate to the needs of play, and many of these meanings are culturally constructed.
Although pretend play may be chosen spontaneously, children may not just act any way they please, but must follow the hidden or implicit rules of behavior. For Vygotsky, these two features of make-believe play support the development of two related capacities: the ability to separate thought from present objects and actions and the ability to restrict impulsive action and act in deliberately self-regulated ways.

One other difference between Vygotsky and Piaget relates to their understanding of the function of **private speech** in cognitive development. Private speech is often overheard as children play imaginatively or work their way through problem solving. Piaget believed that private speech is merely a characteristic of the mind of the preoperational child, egocentric and unable to take the perspectives of others, and having no positive function in development. However, Vygotsky interpreted private speech as used for a different purpose than for communicating with others. The goal of private speech, he felt, is to “communicate with the self for the purpose of self-regulation or guiding one’s own thought processes and actions” (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 37). Gradually, private speech becomes covert, as inner speech or verbal thinking. This puts private speech in the important process of learning to think.

### Cognitive Development and Play

Researchers following the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky discover relationships between various aspects of cognitive development and children's participation in imaginative play. Play gives children chances to practice divergent thinking, using objects in novel ways and increasing their ability to think flexibly and inventively as they solve the problems of play (Stone, 1995). “In the same way that adults ‘talk through’ processes and possible outcomes to problems they face, children ‘play through’ alternatives” (Monaghan-Nourot, 2003, p. 135). Children engaging in pretend play enhance creativity and imagination. Wasserman (2000) calls play the main source of our creativity, noting how many creative persons recall their play experiences as a beginning to their later creative expression.

Fantasy play strengthens memory for both narrative information and lists of objects. Language is embedded in play of all kinds (see Figure 2-7) and especially in sociodramatic play. Children have opportunities to hear others use speech correctly and to increase their vocabulary. In negotiating roles and disputes, children develop linguistic and conversational skills. Children continue to form and modify concepts through play. The capacity to reason theoretically also seems to be influenced by children experienced in entering the pretend mode. Make-believe play may even help children distinguish between appearance and reality. Thus, cognitive abilities are enhanced by children's participation in imaginative play.

**Figure 2-7**

Language is embedded in enjoyable play with others.
Bodrova and Leong (2004) point out that their research indicates that an emphasis on play does not detract from academic learning, but actually enables children to learn. “Play does not compete with foundational skills: Through mature play, children learn the foundational skills that will prepare them for academic challenges” (p. 10). They also report the research of Daniel Elkonin, a student of Vygotsky's. Elkonin identified four ways in which play influences cognitive development.

- Play affects children’s motivation.
- Play facilitates cognitive **decentering**.
- Play supports the development of mental representations.
- Play fosters the development of deliberate behaviors.

Watch for more specifics on just how play influences foundational skills later in this chapter.

**Emotional Development and Play**

Erikson (1963) wrote of the role of play in children’s ego development, seeing themselves as unique beings in relation to others. Through play, children become aware of their own and others’ feelings and are able to take on the perspective of others. Observations show that play allows children to both release and reveal to others their feelings in a pretend world, where expression is not forbidden.

Children who play get opportunities to develop confidence and to master reality as they structure their own reality in a make-believe world. Vivian Paley's work with children in preschool and kindergarten classrooms describes children who write their own stories, and then act them out. Her guided play combines storytelling, writing, reading, and drama. The teacher helps children write their own scripts, as they take turns dictating stories that the teacher then reads aloud to the class. Then the children work together as a group to act out their stories. Paley says that children's questions and explanations are worked out dramatically every day. As she says, “There is no activity for which young children are better prepared than fantasy play. Nothing is more dependable and risk-free, and the dangers are only pretend” (Paley, 2004, p. 8). In play, she has observed children moving “from one strong emotion to the next, from pleasure to jealousy, from power to abandonment, to recovery,” with almost every story beginning with, and returning to, a mother and child (Paley, 2004). Children use fantasy to calm their anxieties; Paley worries about the diminishing of play, particularly in children’s school lives, saying, “When play is curtailed, how are they to confront their fantasy villains?”


Play teaches the child, without his being aware of it, the habits most needed for intellectual growth, such as stick-to-it-iveness, which is so important in all learning. Perseverance is easily acquired around enjoyable activities such as chosen play. But if it has not become a habit through what is enjoyable, it is not likely to become one through an endeavor like schoolwork. (Bettelheim, 1987, p. 36)

The pleasure associated with play offers a positive emotional context for developing the disposition of perseverance. Play asks children to be involved only for the sake of the experience and as an end in itself, not for an external reward or the approval of others. Play encourages and empowers children to take risks; risk taking is necessary to extend learning and personal horizons. Play, says Wasserman (2000), strengthens children’s feelings of personal power and helps them develop a “can-do” attitude. And for children with difficult life circumstances, emotional problems, or developmental delays, play may be even more critical (Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, & Singer, 2006).
Social Development and Play

Play encourages social interaction and, through this interaction, children acquire the social skills that can be learned only through experience. Thus, it is not surprising that teachers see preschoolers who spend more time in dramatic play as more socially competent. Play provides the context for learning to take another perspective. In play, children are presented with social problems to solve. Flexibility and the ability to consider multiple perspectives allow children to compromise or suggest alternatives in roles and scripts that prevent the play from breaking down. Children who are seen as master players (Reynolds & Jones, 1996) have this ability. Social popularity is related to the social abilities to resolve conflicts in friendly, nonaggressive ways (Trawick-Smith, 1994). The skills of learning to get along—taking turns, cooperating, sharing, compromising—are practiced in play (see Figure 2-8). Positive peer relationships and friendships are outcomes of repeated play experiences.

Play gives children the opportunity to learn and practice social conventions, as Vygotsky pointed out. In play, children also have opportunities to go beyond the social constraints of the real world; for example, children who are not generally encouraged to use particular materials or activities may move beyond such stereotypes in play. Play allows children to test concepts of socially acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

This separate discussion of social development should convey the complete interconnectedness of learning about the world within the social context. Vygotsky would state it strongly: There is no learning outside the social context (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

Physical Development and Play

Physical development is nurtured primarily through play, as both gross and fine motor skills are practiced. Children at play develop control of their bodies as they run, climb, and skip. They judge distances as they turn cartwheels and jump. Their eye-hand coordination develops as they paint, cut, and construct. They enjoy testing out their bodies in motion. Play is a source of physical confidence, as children increase their skills and coordination. Playing is doing, which translates into physical development, mastery, and a positive self-concept.

In short, theorists and researchers alike find that play is the medium for learning that integrates all aspects of human development and helps children develop the skills and attitudes they need to adapt to future demands. No wonder an NAEYC position statement declares: “Child-initiated, teacher-supported play is an essential component of developmentally appropriate practice” (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 14).

Play as Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum

Play is the medium best suited to preschool children’s cognitive development. Early childhood educators a half century ago affirmed the importance of play in classrooms for young children. John Dewey, Patty Smith Hill, and Susan Isaacs all supported play as an opportunity for children to explore materials and develop concepts and problem-solving abilities, as well as enhancing
social growth (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2000). Current thinking continues this emphasis. Statements from the major organizations for early childhood professionals (Association for Childhood Education International and the National Association for the Education of Young Children) affirm that play is the medium through which children most appropriately develop in all aspects (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988; ACEI, 2002). The developmental principle articulated in the most recent edition of the NAEYC Position Statement is #10: “Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as promoting language, cognition, and social competence.” When we understand that children are not just empty pitchers to be filled with knowledge from someone else, but instead are active participants in constructing their own knowledge, we understand that play is the context for this active learning. It is through play that children literally teach themselves.

Play is being seriously challenged in many schools and programs, as parents and others pressure teachers to move to more controlled and specific curricula. Later in this chapter we will address the topic of how to help families appreciate the importance of play for laying foundations for academic success. Right now, it is vital for teachers to be able to articulate the important value of play. The following sections describe what play offers that makes it the most appropriate curriculum for young children.

1. **Play Provides for All Areas of a Child’s Development**

   Play provides for all areas of development in a simultaneous and integrated way; for example, when Thomas and Will work together on a large structure in the block area that they later call a space station, they are
   - cooperating and sharing ideas and conversation.
   - problem solving.
   - developing eye-hand coordination and fine motor skills.
   - working on an understanding of balance.
   - representing a concept symbolically.
   - extending attention span, task perseverance, and concentration.
   - learning to listen and take into account the perspectives of others.
   - expressing themselves in language.
   - enjoying companionship and feelings of success.

   Just consider other possible learning, and which of the domains is being developed in such a play scenario. What better curriculum could there be than one that supports the development of the whole child?

2. **Play Emphasizes Learning as an Active/Interactive Process**

   The involvement of children in meaningful activities gives them a context for their learning. Vygotsky helped us understand that play leads development, that social engagement and collaboration with others is the powerful force that transforms children’s thinking. Through cooperative dialogues and interactions with more knowledgeable peers or adults, children learn to think and behave in more mature ways. The following shows how the interchange between Thomas and Will began.

   **Will:** “But we can’t live there, because people don’t live in space.”

   **Thomas:** “Well, but they live on space ships because I saw pictures. They were bouncing around.”

   Will (for whom this was obviously a new idea): “Okay, but there’s no bouncing on the space station, because then it would fall to the water. Here, this can be the water,” as he runs over to get a piece of paper from the art shelf across the room.
3. **Play Presents Highly Motivated Opportunities for Learning**

Because children choose to participate in activities that are meaningful to them, play presents highly motivated opportunities for learning. They choose whether or not to play, their play partners and their tasks, their roles, and their involvement. The children accept the learning challenges because they are interested in and ready for the tasks they have selected.

*Thomas:* “Oh no, that part fell off.” The two boys stare at each other and at the structure.

*Will:* “Here, I know. Put that big block on the corner. You hold it while I put the little one back on. See, that will do it.”

A hundred lessons offered directly by a teacher on the concepts of size and balance could not have taught these two more than they taught themselves in their play.

Adults must be careful to distinguish between those kinds of adult-manipulated play that thinly disguise the adult’s teaching/learning agenda and do not really allow children to freely choose what and how they will play. For example, Montessori’s fine materials may be used only in a particular way, in a particular progression of skills, as presented by the teacher. This does not provide for children’s choice, creativity, or true play.

4. **Play Allows for Differences**

Play allows for differences in developmental ability, interest, and learning style. Within the choices prepared by the teacher are opportunities for children to play alone or together; to play with simple or more complex materials; to construct, create, match, manipulate, explore, and pretend; and to succeed at their own level. “It is reasonable to assume that where a single teaching method is used for a diverse group of children, a significant proportion of these children are likely to fail” (Katz, 1987, p. 3). No such failure occurs in play where children are able to find the activities best suited to them, their needs, and their interests. Obviously, as children with special learning needs or disabilities are included in classrooms with more typically developing children, they can succeed at their level (whatever that level may be) in an environment designed for play (Sandall, 2004). (See Figure 2-10.)
In the center next to Thomas and Will, Julio is filling containers with red play dough. He pushes hard to see how much he can get in each container. Julio is challenged by his cerebral palsy and has difficulty using fingers separately. Beside him, Hilary and Anna chat about making pizza as they roll out and shape the play dough. Sam, at the end of the table, is making an “s” with his play dough and excitedly points it out to Julio: “See Julio, that says ‘s’ for me!”

Children who play can set their own tasks and are likely to succeed at such self-assigned challenges. Self-confidence as learners grows.

5. Play Allows for Practice and Repetition of Newly Acquired Skills, Competencies, and Ideas

As the position statement reminds us, development and learning advance when children have many opportunities to practice newly acquired skills. Children need to be successful at learning much of the time in order to maintain their persistence and motivation. Practice in play and activity enhances that success.

This is why adults will often see children return to the same familiar puzzle or building activity, or to the same scripts for their play. Practice makes perfect, and again builds children’s confidence as learners.

6. Play Promotes Self-Regulation

Children learn to regulate their behavior in dramatic play, as the explicit role they adopt limits their actions with its implicit rules. In play, children understand that they are imposing certain rules, ways that things are supposed to be done. One child grabs the phone to speak to the other, and the other child corrects him, “No, first you have to say ‘Hello, this is the fire station, what is your emergency?’”—words they learned on a recent visit to the fire station. Or children plan together, knowing what the role behaviors and appropriate role speech will be: “Pretend you’re the mean sister, okay?” Everybody knows how the “mean sister” behaves differently than the “good sister.” Though pretend play is a spontaneous activity, children may not act just anyway they choose. Instead, in following the hidden rules of behavior learned from their environments, they learn to regulate their own behavior. Vygotsky said that only sustained, intentional make-believe play would foster deliberateness and self-regulation. How many elementary school teachers have you heard say that children in their classrooms don’t seem to have self-discipline anymore?

7. Play Contributes to Brain Development

The preschool years are the fastest growth period for the frontal lobe networks, with play contributing to brain development. The speed of processing, memory, and problem solving increases as a result of this rapid growth. Because of the activity in the higher brain centers, preschool children increase in the levels of attention and their ability to inhibit impulses. Research shows that the synapses in the higher brain centers are activated by following scripts and taking roles that require self-regulation and problem solving (Bergen, 2004). Complex play experiences with other children enhance the development of the higher brain centers.

Moreover, play that links sensorimotor, cognitive, and social-emotional experiences provides an ideal setting for brain development. Optimal brain development occurs when the child interacts with the environment and the environment is responsive to that interaction. Play provides that kind of stimulation and integration (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). Neuroscientists point out that the connections between brain cells that underlie new learning become hard-wired if they are used repeatedly, as happens in rich play experiences. “The more senses involved during learning,
the more likely the brain will receive and process information” (Schiller & Willis, 2008, p. 54). Play activity uses multiple senses. Healthy brain development is essential for later academic success.

8. **Play Promotes Acquisition of Foundational Skills**

In today’s climate of high concern about test results, a major interest of many parents and educators is making sure children will enter school ready to succeed in their academic future. This is where proponents of developmentally appropriate practice must be clear and specific in helping explain the link between play and foundation skills. There are literally dozens of studies that show the connections between play and many complex cognitive activities, such as memory, self-regulation, distancing and **decontextualization**, oral language abilities, symbolic generalization, successful school adjustment, and better social skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2004).

Children remember more when learned under play conditions. Given a list of ten words, children are better able to remember them in a play context. Children use more vocabulary in play, and more advanced oral speech patterns. Play allows children to advance in their mental representations. In their beginning pretend play, they use replicas to substitute for real objects—a toy telephone, for example. Then they move to using new objects that are different in appearance but can perform the same function—a block for the telephone. Finally, most of the substitution takes place in the child’s speech, with no prop needed—the child who stares off into space, hand held to ear, and paces while carrying on an animated conversation with an invisible partner. This ability to make mental transformations contributes to the development of abstract thinking. Later, in school, when children learn the written symbols of language and mathematics, they use this ability, developed through play, to perform symbolic transformations. The ability to understand that H and K, cat, boy, 14 and 7 are combinations of lines that represent sounds, words, and numbers is similar to this capacity to use a block to represent a telephone.

In their spontaneous play activity, children show their knowing in the doing. In literacy-enriched play settings, they show us they understand the uses of literacy materials, as they take orders in a restaurant, write a prescription for a sick dog in the vet’s office, or make highway signs for the roads built in the block area. Understanding what written language is for and how it works is an important part of emergent literacy. In studies that focus on the relationship between play and literacy, researchers find an increase in children’s use of literacy materials and activities and gains in **phonological awareness** (Roskos & Christie, 2001). Thus, through play, children can learn in ways that the competent preschool mind can use to succeed, rather than in the deficiency models of the academic preschool that “demand premature practice of what one doesn’t know how to do” (Jones & Reynolds, 1992, p. 5). The skills that children learn through purposeful, high-quality play experiences include skills in verbalization, language comprehension, vocabulary, problem solving, observation, empathy, imagination, taking on another’s perspective, learning to cooperate with others, and using symbols. These are all foundational skills for all cognitive development and academic achievement.

But beyond foundational skills, there are other qualities of developing imagination and creativity in play that relate to the curriculum appropriate to prepare children for future success in this twenty-first century. Jerome Bruner put the dilemma of appropriate learning experiences this way: “How can school systems that prepare the young for entry into the society deal with a future that is increasingly difficult to predict within a single lifetime?” At least one answer to this question is to foster adaptive, flexible, creative thinking. Make-believe play is essential to the development of this capacity. “Let’s pretend” is the foundation for the kinds of thinking that does not just lead to test results. (See Figure 2-11.)

![Figure 2-11](https://example.com/figure211.jpg)

**Figure 2-11**
High-quality play experiences lay important foundational skills.
And, when teachers are dealing with skeptics who believe that direct teaching of foundational skills is more important than play, they can report that a study that followed children from preschool through second grade, reported by David Elkind, found that children who had engaged in dramatic play as preschoolers demonstrated superior literacy and numerical skills. It doesn’t have to be either/or. It’s play and foundational skills.

9. Play Lays the Cornerstone for Social and Moral Development

As they create imaginary worlds together, children are presented with social problems to solve: What happens when two players both want to be the mommy? What if the pretend daddy refuses to help clean up the dishes? How can we include Suri, who doesn’t speak any English but wants to play with us? And, perhaps the most urgent question of all, What do I do if they say I can’t play?

Within the context of play, children learn to see things from another’s viewpoint. (Wow, she really wants to be the mother too, or Suri looks like she wants to play, or even, they don’t want me to play because they said I knocked down their house.) The ability to consider other perspectives enhances social flexibility and allows children to compromise or suggest alternatives in roles and scripts that allow the play to continue. (Okay Suri, you can be the kitty, as the child realizes that kitties have no need for English, or How about we both be mommies taking our babies to the park to play?) Children who are experienced players have the ability to resolve conflicts in friendly, nonaggressive ways. The skills of learning to get along—taking turns, cooperation, sharing, and compromising—are practiced in play. These skills, in fact, can be learned only through experience, not taught by adults. Positive peer relationships and friendships are outcomes of repeated play experiences. And the best outcome is acquiring the skills to treat others with respect and consideration, while feeling competent and accepted in the world of peers. Studies show that teachers evaluate preschoolers and primary children who spend more time in dramatic play as more socially competent. An important study by the National Institutes of Mental Health, published in 2000, was titled A Good Beginning—Sending America’s Children to School with the Social and Emotional Competence They Need to Succeed. That social competence, achieved through the interaction of play, will have more lasting effects on early academic success than any pile of preschool work sheets.

10. Play Supports Children’s Emotional Development

Daniel Goleman argues that emotional intelligence, or EQ, is a more influential factor determining a child’s future than his IQ. Play provides simultaneously for intellectual and emotional development. Through play, children become aware of their own and others’ feelings and are able to empathize and take on the perspective of others. Play allows children to both express and cope with their feelings in a world that is not real, so expression is safe and acceptable. For example, sometimes teachers see a child punish a baby doll harshly, and then comfort it, as she perhaps deals with her own feelings at receiving adult anger, or even being replaced by a new baby.

As children play, they can come to understand their feelings in an intuitive sense and deal with them in concrete yet imaginary ways. Real-world stress, pain, and fear can be decreased through play. Consider the child who had recently moved to a new apartment after Mom and Dad had split, spending playtime after playtime packing clothes and dishes in a box, transporting them, and then unpacking, as her play helped her cope with the new situation and changes in her life.

Three common themes in children’s play have their roots in children’s emotional realities and desires: the need for protection (I’ll be the baby, okay, and you can be my mommy); the need for power over things (I’m going to be the Superflyer and I’m faster than everybody.) and the need to attack and destroy (Did you know that Superflyers can wreck people’s houses?). Play
SECTION 1 • Defining Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Play Allows Kids to Figure Out Who They Are

For years, David Elkind has written about the stress of modern children, and the release play offers them from this stress. Actual physiological evidence links anxiety reduction to play. Play makes children feel better.

These, then, are ten good reasons that play should be considered the most developmentally appropriate medium for young children. Use them as you discuss the question “Why play?” with parents and colleagues.

Children who are actively involved in activities they have chosen with materials they can use successfully show the correctness of considering play as the appropriate curriculum for them. They are filled with energy, enthusiasm, and curiosity. They are excited by their discoveries and confident in their abilities. Participation in the play is extending their ability to stay with a task, that is, to persevere. They do not have to be harangued or manipulated into staying with the task a little longer. Their self-esteem as learners and as people is nurtured.

In the light of such evidence of the importance of play, some contemporary authors are arguing for clear play policies to articulate and promote the importance of play for all children and to enable all children to have equal access to good quality play environments in their local communities (Hampshire Play Policy Forum, 2002).

In addition, research has shown that certain conditions support and enhance play optimally. We will now consider these conditions.

CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORT PLAY

Play occurs within particular contexts, and the context may provide certain conditions that support the quality of play. Read the examples that follow to identify some of the conditions that foster quality play.

This morning one of the classroom choices is the sensory table filled with sawdust. The teacher has added some small plastic dinosaurs and pieces of greenery to the table. Another choice is a small table that holds three mounds of play dough along with some small baking utensils. Still another choice is a box of small cars, placed on the floor near the cubbyhole behind the easel.

On the playground, a box of scarves and old ties stands ready for the children to find them, along with some plastic hoops and ropes. Yesterday, playground play was disrupted several times by children attempting to duplicate some superhero play they had seen on television. Knowing many of them had been to the circus the week before, the teacher is hoping the materials will suggest a change in the theme of the play.

The teacher sits cutting materials near the dramatic play area, where Heather, Rob, and Lia are playing with medical props, bandaging some of the stuffed animals. When a dispute over the stethoscope breaks out, the teacher asks, “Are any of the patients ready to go home yet?”
A teacher, noticing the store play again today in the dramatic play area, hands a pile of newly made money to a child standing nearby, and says “Looks like they’ll need some more money for the change.”

Examining these vignettes yields some ideas about the conditions adults can control when creating environments to support play. Bruner (1983) noted that play is improved when the following conditions exist: available playmates; appropriate play materials, especially those planned to encourage more combining experiences; and an adult nearby, not necessarily involved in the action, but as a source of stability in the play situation. When teachers stay close to the play, they can see where appropriate intervention could be helpful (see Figure 2-12).

Other researchers have noted that factors in the physical context, such as amounts and arrangements of space and materials for play, help children focus their attention on play. Sufficient unscheduled time is another physical variable that influences the duration and complexity of play that develops. Play is also affected by real-world experiences and the context of social and cultural relationships in the larger world. We will consider these aspects separately here.

**Physical Environment for Play**

The arrangements teachers make in the physical environment influence children’s ability to make play choices, become involved and sustain play, and interact with others. Elizabeth Jones suggests that teachers consider themselves as stage managers, creating the settings that will promote play. As teachers create play spaces, with clear pathways and boundaries, children can readily identify play choices and materials, as well as find the privacy needed to create play scenarios. Flexibility about placement, movement, and use of furnishings and materials—“Hey, that little stool could be our campfire!”—can allow play to expand, as well as support creative representation. Space is important; aggression and less social play behaviors increase as the amount of space decreases (Ward, 1996). Providing spaces both large enough for several children to play together and small enough to support private fantasy play helps children at all stages of play. More sociodramatic play occurs in partitioned spaces than in large open areas (Ward, 1996). The teacher who set up the area that suggested individual play with cars and the play dough table that invited three to “bake” together created this kind of physical environment.

Providing a variety of materials influences play from both developmental and cultural viewpoints. Having realistic replications of real-life objects may help children who are not yet advanced in their symbolic representation, as well as children who identify items familiar from their home and cultural context. The little cars are an example of such realistic materials. Also, providing abundant loose parts—open materials that can be used and combined in any number of ways—allows children to create and extend their own ideas in play. The scarves, ties, ropes, and hoops mentioned earlier are examples of such loose parts. Play needs plenty of props.

Alert teachers also add, or provide an atmosphere in which children feel free to add or create their own props that extend play or encourage more children to join in, as did the teacher with the play money and the children with the stool. When children move with materials to other areas, teachers should not feel the need to make children put toys away as they move on—later at the end of play is fine, lest great ideas be interrupted. Time is another variable of the physical environment. When teachers allow large, uninterrupted blocks of time, complex play will more likely develop. In one study, a minimum of thirty minutes was required for children to become fully involved in quality play (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). It takes time to produce an idea, select roles, find pretend props, negotiate, and communicate. Just as
children vary in their social stages of play, temperament, and style, some may need more time to involve themselves in play. An onlooker may have to observe the play long enough to find a convenient entry place and method, and a parallel player may slowly warm up to group interaction. Enough time allows children to expand and develop play scripts; too little time may push them into merely repetitive or very simple play themes. Classrooms that support play provide unbroken periods of time, both indoors and out. Outdoors, dramatic play develops after physical exploration—usually taking more than forty-five minutes to get started. And, of course, time for play also means not interrupting children’s play to achieve a teacher’s goal, such as making a picture to take home to Mom, when the child is happily constructing in the block area.

**Real-World Experiences**

Opportunities for hands-on, real-world experiences provide children with the basis for imagination. Classroom teachers provide these experiences by planning field trips, inviting visitors from the surrounding community into the classroom, and carefully selecting children’s literature. The teacher who hoped to stimulate a circus theme for play, for instance, provided props to help the children re-create and revisit their real experience. (The aggressive play that had disturbed the playground the day before was an imitation of a not-real experience from television that had not given as much richness for the children’s imagination to explore.)

**Teacher Intervention**

Smilansky (1968) was the first to suggest that adult intervention in children’s sociodramatic play might enrich the quality of the play. In her research on low-income immigrant children in Israel, she found that some children play in less social, imaginative, verbal, or organized ways than do others; in fact, some do not engage in pretend play at all. She hypothesized that children’s inability to engage in sociodramatic play could correlate with later academic difficulties in school, and that specific adult strategies could teach children new play skills. In today’s world, many educators are concerned that children’s home and classroom experiences are not sufficient to produce the rich, imaginative play long considered to be a characteristic of early childhood. Reasons for this may include the fact that changes in the social context now place children for most of their playtime in the company of same-age peers who may not act as effective teachers of advanced play skills. In addition, toy manufacturers produce increasingly realistic playthings, which do not encourage the need for representational skills. So-called “educational toys,” created for marketing to anxious parents, often do not stimulate pretend play. The present emphasis on increasing academic demands in preschool and kindergarten programs also contributes to children’s lack of play opportunities (Bodrova & Leong, 2004).

Smilansky developed a system for assessing the quality of children’s sociodramatic play that included being able to

- choose a role and maintain pretend behavior consistent with the role.
- use make-believe props, gestures, and words in pretend actions.
- expand pretend play into episodes, rather than simply imitating brief actions.
- sustain their pretend play over time (a minimum of five minutes for preschoolers).
- play with at least one other child.
- communicate verbally to coordinate and direct the action.

Heidemann and Hewitt (2010) have developed a Play Checklist for teachers to use in observing children’s play, adapting some of Smilansky’s ideas, and further expanding it to include social skills needed for play (see Figure 2-13).
Text not available due to copyright restrictions
The intervention techniques Smilansky identified include the following:

- providing real experiences for children to play out and then providing props that relate to those experiences
- observing children’s play carefully to note those who don’t pretend or who need adult assistance to extend their play
- intervening actively to help children develop their play abilities. Returning to the term used by Vygotsky’s followers to describe helping children take the next steps in their understanding, this intervention, or play coaching, is a kind of scaffolding.

Teachers who are considering appropriate intervention in children’s play must observe certain cautions (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Teachers should intervene only if and when children need support. When play is proceeding well, a teacher’s best role is observer, learning about the children through their play. When teachers do intervene, their methods should not disrupt the play, but instead preserve and continue it. Intervention should be brief, with teachers withdrawing as soon as possible. When children indicate that they would rather play alone, this should be respected.

When teachers decide that intervention would benefit play, they may take several approaches, including helping children plan and organize play, prompting to add new ideas, modeling to demonstrate play behaviors, and providing props.

**Helping Children Plan and Organize Play.** In mature play, children can describe to each other what the play scenario is, who is playing which role, and how the action will proceed. After the teacher observes the play, it may be appropriate to help the children define their focus and intentions. This might seem necessary when play is not developing into complex episodes, as when children are developing their play fragments independently or are not making their pretend intentions clear to other participants. The teacher then can enter play that has already started as a co-player; the adult influences the play by asking for instructions, and responding to the children’s actions and comments (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). By asking a question, the teacher can help children organize their make-believe mentally and interact more verbally with other players, resulting in more complex play.

“Where are you going in your car?”

“What are you going to cook for supper?”

“Who are you going to be?”

**Prompting to Add New Ideas.** Teachers may extend play by asking questions, giving hints, or providing direct suggestions—cues, like a stage director (see Figure 2-14). This may encourage children to use objects for representation, involve other children in the play, or otherwise extend the play theme. This play tutoring may come from outside the play (outside intervention) as the teacher sits close by, making comments and suggestions to the children, or from within, as the teacher plays with the children (inside intervention), taking a role as an active participant (Ward, 1996). In this more direct intervention, the teacher suggests specific strategies to help play develop, and teaches new play behaviors within the episode.

“Maybe you could use a block for your notebook.”

“We need somebody else for a patient—you could ask Darren.”

“What could you use to keep your baby warm?”

By imaginatively entering play that is beginning to deteriorate, teachers can successfully extend it. They may model strategies from within the play.
“Well, I’m getting pretty hungry—is supper nearly ready?”

“Could I hold the baby for you while you cook our supper?”

**Modeling to Demonstrate Play Behaviors.** When teachers model, they actually demonstrate the pretend behaviors associated with playing roles. They may model as they play parallel with children, not interacting with children or directing the play, but doing what the children are doing in more sophisticated ways, and perhaps commenting on her own play. Teachers may model when invited to join play episodes, adding new ideas or information (see Figure 2-15).

They may also model how to start play episodes. You will read more about modeling in Chapter 15.

“I’m tired and hungry after our trip. I’ll sit here and wait for you to serve supper.”

“Mmm, this is delicious. How did you cook this chicken?”

“Oh, I’m not feeling so good. Could you please drive me to the doctor’s office?”

**Providing Props.** Children’s pretend play can be supported when teachers add props related to the theme when appropriate. Adding props may extend the play or make it more complex. As teachers provide culturally relevant materials, they encourage children to play with familiar items.

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**VIDEO ACTIVITY**

Go to the premium Web site and watch the video clip for Chapter 2 entitled “The Importance of Play.” Then answer the following questions:

**REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS**

1. As you watch this video, be sure you understand the distinct kinds of social play illustrated, as they were discussed in this chapter. Consider what the child gains from each kind of play.

2. As you watch the final scenario, consider the separate roles of a teacher, as discussed in this chapter, which support this play.

3. If the teacher felt she could extend this play, what would be a good way for her to enter the play?

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**Visit the premium Web site to complete these questions online and email them to your professor.**

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Figure 2-15 (a & b)

When teachers play with children, they may model behaviors and add new ideas.
“I see you’re going on a bus. Here are some tickets.”
“Here’s a spoon if you need one to taste your soup.”
“Would you like to use this wok to fix your dinner?”

Teachers should, however, be cautious regarding intervention. Some teacher intervention may actually interrupt the play. Sometimes when teachers enter the play, they are so dominant that the play begins to center around the adults. This is obviously disruptive. Another temptation is to interrupt the play to teach concepts. When teachers do intervene, their methods should not disrupt the play, but instead preserve and continue it. As Elizabeth Jones has written,

When in doubt, trust the play. It is the children’s curriculum. Play that is scattered or potentially disruptive may require refocusing, but well-focused complex play requires no intervention. . . . Adults who interrupt play, whatever their reasons, are usually in so much of a hurry that they fail to pay attention to the children’s purposes. SLOW DOWN is advice to keep in mind. . . . We learn most about children, and help them learn most, when we pay attention to what is happening for them as they play. (Jones & Reynolds, 1992, pp 55–56)

**ISSUES INVOLVING PLAY**

There are many questions and concerns that arise regarding children’s play. Discussion of these issues follows.

**Violent Play**

An ongoing question about intervention in children’s play relates to the violent kinds of play teachers call “war and superhero play.” Often stimulated by children’s exposure to certain kinds of television programming, one concern has been that such play is merely repetitive, limited to the very narrow range of ideas introduced by a particular program, and painstakingly reenacted without development but with complete duplication of the violence. In addition, teachers worry that such play will cause children to feel out of control, frightened, or hurt, and will teach harmful lessons about violence. Certainly in recent times, children have been exposed to many violent world events. Many of today’s best-selling toys are linked to violent media, drawing children into replicating the violent stories they see in the media.

There are opposing schools of thought about this kind of play. Some argue that it should be restricted completely or at least limited to particular times or places, such as outdoor playtime. Others limit it by prohibiting weapons, saying, “No guns/knives/and so on, allowed.” Enforcing such a rule brings constant struggle. But some proponents argue that children’s play based on television themes should not be restricted in these ways because developmental benefits may result from such play (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 1990; Levin, 2004). For example, children may gain a feeling of power or explore the distinctions between reality and fantasy in such play. Unfortunately, though, superhero play may end abruptly when someone gets hurt. Levin reports that children who appear to be most obsessed with war and superhero play have the hardest time engaging in creative and imaginative play of their own scripts.
One way out of the dilemma is to permit the play but actively intervene to help children develop understandings about violence and war and alternative methods of solving problems (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987). A teacher’s questions can help children consider the consequences of violence and other options, broaden their roles, or encourage more imaginative, less stereotypical reenactments. Such teacher intervention may be appropriate for this kind of play. Teachers can encourage children to talk about media violence, correct children’s misconceptions, and provide reassurance about safety. They can also help children convert the stereotyped behaviors into transformational play; for example, they could help children make up their own stories about their favorite characters from a TV program.

Such an important topic should be addressed with families, helping them learn more about protecting children from violence, including promoting play with open-ended toys, rather than those toys linked to violence. See the NAEYC position statement on media violence in children’s lives (NAEYC, 1990).

Cultural and Technological Influences on Play

Although play is universal, the appearance of specific forms of play differs across different cultures. How play is expressed depends on a child’s cultural context. Reasons for this likely depend on distinct cultural values regarding the value of play for children in general and expectations or limitations on activity for both genders. Adults in a culture determine the play environments and materials they will provide for children and the kinds of play they model and approve. The kinds of mother-child pretend play vary from culture to culture. As adults involve themselves in children’s play, this intervention is indeed cultural, sometimes teaching lessons of facilitating play directly, leading to the thought that there is not necessarily one best way for children and adult to play.

Many observers have noted recently that the very ability to play is being affected in young children in contemporary America, because they are so influenced by developments in culture today. The popularity of technology and the availability of computer and video games may be having an effect on social play and on creative imaginative play. Screen time—time before television, DVDs, computer screens—takes an increasing amount of time in children’s lives, time they once spent in play. This means that children are usually passive recipients of someone else’s agenda. Two-thirds of children under two use some kind of screen media on a typical day for about two hours—this despite the fact that the American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended no television for children under age two, partly because of the lack of information about the prolonged effect of television viewing on the immature eye. Children under age six spend an average of two to three hours a day with screen media—at least three times longer than the time they spend being read to or reading. The deregulation of children’s television programming in the late 1980s allowed toy manufacturers to both produce children’s television programming and market toys during television shows. Such an influence obviously affects children’s play. Moreover, prolonged time spent in passive communication with screen media reduces the time they are spending in interesting exploration, writing their own scripts, or acting out their own stories. Too often, when children play out the stories they have seen, the scripts of television stories become a limiting force, not something to use as a springboard for their own stories. And also not incidentally, children spending screen time are basically spending time alone, not interacting with siblings or neighborhood playmates. So much that could be learned about how to play with others is missed when children are denied such interaction with other children. They are indoors, inactive, and missing so many of the joys of being in the natural world. In the book Last Child in the Woods by Richard Louv (2008), the author asked some children where they most preferred to play. One boy replied, “Inside, because that’s where the electrical outlets are.” Those outlets and everything plugged into them are threatening children’s ability to really play.

Screen time is not the only insidious contribution of the technological age. Toys containing embedded computer chips have also affected children’s play. All kinds of toys are going
high-tech—industry analysts estimate that at least 75 percent of toys debuting this year have a microchip that controls the action and dictates the play.

Another cultural influence on play is the loss of freedom for children to play freely outdoors, as parents react to dangers in neighborhoods. Today, adult supervision and protection is deemed necessary, and that diminishes real opportunities for play. In addition, some of the overprogramming of children's time in organized activities also takes away from their time and ability to play spontaneously. Classes and enrichment activities abound for even the youngest children, meaning that adults are organizing and controlling the activity. Once again, child-initiated play suffers.

Cultural values have impact on children's play. For example, one study compared populations of middle-class Korean-American and middle-class Anglo-American children in separate preschools. Influenced by Anglo-American values, that preschool encouraged independent thinking, problem solving, and active involvement in learning, with available choices from a wide range of activities. The Anglo-American preschool encouraged social interaction among the children and collaboration with the teacher. In the Korean-American preschool, in keeping with their traditional values, there was an emphasis on completing tasks and developing academic skills. The Korean-American preschool allowed children to talk and play only during outdoor playtime.

The observers found that Anglo-American children engaged in more social play, and that the Korean-American children engaged in more unoccupied or parallel play. The Korean-American children played more cooperatively, often offering toys to other children, likely a reflection of the cultural emphasis on group harmony. The Anglo-American children were more aggressive in their play, often responding negatively to other children's suggestions, perhaps showing the cultural value of competitiveness in American culture (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2006). "Cultures that value verbal expression, fantasy, and imaginative play will encourage that kind of play, and cultures that value play, movement, and manipulation of real objects will place more value on functional and constructive play" (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005, p. 188).

Another observer noted that children in New Guinea play games in which neither side wins, and the game ends only when both sides achieve equality. This sounds quite different from games in America that typically stress competition. Play, then, reflects and expresses the cultural knowledge children have acquired.

Research shows that there is enormous variation across cultures in the content and style of children's play. Current research on culture and play centers on: investigations that describe play and related behaviors in specific cultures; comparisons of play of children in different countries; and study of the play of immigrant children attending preschools in a new culture (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). Sociocultural approaches have begun to articulate a culturally sensitive theory of play, one that tries to understand how universal and cultural variable aspects of play interact in specific communities.

Principles from preschool programs around the world are worth considering by American early childhood educators. The entire issue of Young Children from September 2004 highlights similarities and unique perspectives from early childhood education in Malaysia, Japan, Cuba, Kenya, Iceland, Budapest, and Nordic countries, as well as an extensive bibliography of resources about play and early childhood education around the globe.

Play is a powerful way for young children to practice the roles and skills they will need as adults in their culture. Therefore, it follows that specific play behaviors and scripts will vary from culture to culture.

Researchers also find that boys and girls play differently in most cultures, perhaps attributable to cultural influence on their play, as well as to biological and brain differences (Gurian, 2001). Boys generally like rough-and-tumble play in groups. Girls generally play more quietly, with one playmate (see Figure 2-16). Moreover, across cultures, parents and teachers tend to treat boys and girls differently, encouraging boys in stereotypically masculine activities such as block play and rough-and-tumble play, and girls in doll and nurturing play (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005).
Even when boys and girls play with the same toys, they play more socially with others of the same gender. Boys play more boisterously and girls more cooperatively. In dramatic play, boys generally create scenarios that involve danger and fighting, whereas girls’ plots generally focus on maintaining social relationships. Again, no doubt cultural values and expectations influence some of these differences. It is also worth noting that the majority of early childhood teachers are females who may or may not be able to appreciate rough-and-tumble play of male children.

It is important for teachers to be aware of the cultural values of all the families in a classroom, to become sensitive to their attitudes regarding play, and to understand the expectations they have for both girls and boys. Teachers should not expect that all parents will necessarily appreciate the value of play and should anticipate the need for clear, accepting, and ongoing dialogue. Indeed, concern about the academic achievement gap between many minority children and white and Asian children causes many of their parents to assume that they will benefit more from direct instruction, and that play is not the best path to later success. Many parents believe that learning important academic skills and concepts should not necessarily be pleasurable and certainly not child-initiated, as is good play. We shall address this issue later in the chapter.

**Play for Children with Special Needs**

Children who have particular disabilities are children first. Their families and teachers are challenged to provide environments that allow the children to participate as fully as possible in the play of childhood. As teachers understand the limitations and necessary adaptations for particular children, they can help all children participate in and learn from their play. There has been a bias toward direct instruction in special education, believing that the desired outcomes would not occur without intervention and explicit teaching. Recently the Council for Exceptional Children, Division for Early Childhood (DEC) has paid specific attention to the importance of play for children with disabilities. The DEC Recommended Practices specifically states: “Play routines are structured to promote interaction, communication, and learning by defining roles for dramatic play, prompting engagement, prompting group friendship activities, and using specialized props” (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005). It is recognized that direct instructional strategies may be needed to help children with disabilities initiate activity, use materials appropriately, and make choices. Many of the ideas for adaptations will come as teachers observe each child’s play and learn to match the level of support with the child’s specific need.

Modifications will depend on specific disabilities and may include changes to the physical environment. This might include clearly marked, traffic areas wide enough for wheelchairs and...
walkers, specific quiet areas, additional light, and accessible playground surfacing (see Figures 2-17a & 2-17b). The environment should be highly ordered and predictable, so that children can learn where equipment and materials are located.

- large enough chunks of time to fully initiate play and engage in exploration.
- adaptations of materials. This might include using simple tabletop easels, using adaptive equipment to hold books, inserting crayons through tennis balls for easy gripping, attaching paint brushes to a child’s hand with Velcro, making adaptations to dress-up clothing, adding knobs to puzzle pieces for easy handling, or providing realistic toys that give children cues of how to play with them.
- simplified activities. This might include breaking an activity into smaller parts or drawing pictures for the child to follow the steps.
- using child preferences. Teachers encourage children to play by using their preferred materials, activities, or people. An example of this would be creating an airplane theme in dramatic play for the child who is fascinated by planes.
- special equipment. Special or adaptive devices might facilitate children’s participation in play, such as positioning a child in a beanbag chair rather than his wheelchair, to be more accessible to the action in the dramatic play area.
- adult support. Teachers or other adults join in children’s play to encourage their involvement through modeling, verbal guidance, physical assistance, use of visual cues, and commenting.
- peer support. When teachers pair children with buddies, children with special needs receive support for their play (and other children learn prosocial ways of helping others).

It is vital that teachers realize their role in making adaptations so that all children can benefit from rich play experiences.
Play and Learning Standards

In recent years, particularly following the Good Start/Grow Smart initiative begun by the Child Care Bureau in 2002, all states and the District of Columbia have established early learning standards related to language, literacy, and math for three- to five-year-olds.

**Defining Learning Standards.** The Early Childhood Education Assessment Consortium of the Council of Chief State School Officers defines standards as: “statements that describe expectations for the learning and development of young children across the domains of health and physical well-being; social and emotional well-being; approaches to learning; language development and symbol systems; and general knowledge about the world around them” (Early Childhood Education Assessment Consortium, 2005).

The standards for young children focus on the primary tasks of young children of acquiring and refining foundational skills of listening, using language, working with others, and focusing attention on activity that they will later use to learn content matter in later grades. The idea for the early learning guidelines is that they should be aligned with state K–12 standards and describe what children need to know and be able to do to succeed in kindergarten.

There are positive aspects to defining early learning standards. As stated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) in the position statement *Early Learning Standards: Creating the Conditions for Success,* “By defining the desired content and outcomes of young children’s education, early learning standards can lead to greater opportunities for positive development and learning in the early years” (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2002, p. 2). Several other positive aspects of early learning standards are noted by Gronlund (2006) and Seefeldt (2005). These include:

- matching standards to what we are already doing
- linking to primary standards to contribute to school readiness
- helping to identify next steps and transitions, providing for continuous curriculum
- providing higher expectations for children
- creating a commonality and clarity for communication
- providing a mechanism for accountability.

The NAEYC position statement (2009) notes that “to be beneficial, standards need to be comprehensive across the learning domains and disciplines, aligned across grade levels, and appropriate to children’s development and learning” (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 4).

Unfortunately, the various state learning standards show unevenness in their attention to these aspects. As you examine your own state early learning standards, consider whether they give great attention to some areas of development while neglecting other domains. (If you don’t already have a copy of your state learning standards, you can search for them at www.research-connections.org.) Developed with little coordination, every state’s standards address cognitive and academic skills such as language, literacy, and mathematics, but many pay less attention to social-emotional development, physical health and development, and “approaches to learning,” such as curiosity, persistence, and flexible thinking.

Thus the negative possibilities of early learning standards cause concern among early educators. These include:

- teaching to the standards and loss of unique and appropriate curricula
- the risk of pushdown curricula and inappropriate expectations for young children
- reliance on direct instruction to ensure addressing the standards
- focus on superficial learning objectives
- use of testing and other inappropriate methods of assessing progress.
Connecting Play with Learning Standards. The biggest concern is how to connect children’s play with learning standards. Many educators feared that they would just not have time to allow children to play, with all the “requirements” that would take so much class time. How can educators help children reach the guidelines in developmentally appropriate ways?

The good news is that it can be done. Learning standards and developmentally appropriate practices can indeed go together. What is required is to incorporate learning standards into play, into emergent curriculum and projects, and into small- and large-group times (Gronlund, 2008). Children’s play becomes the vehicle for accomplishing the learning standards, and the medium for assessing their progress toward those standards.

As teachers provide rich, integrated learning experiences for children, they can see that children’s engagement leads to genuine involvement in learning, helping them make connections and the strong memories that are created when the brain is emotionally involved. As teachers plan curriculum experiences, they use a variety of teaching strategies, including some that are teacher determined and directed, and others in which children’s interests and curiosity play a role in determining the direction of learning. They keep as their goal children’s active involvement in learning, and then they consider how to meet the standards. The sure knowledge of the importance of play and active learning for engagement is the starting point in planning appropriate experiences, not concern about planning narrow lessons to teach the content or skills outlined by the standards.

In order to integrate standards into play-based learning, it is first vital that teachers understand and know the knowledge, skills, and dispositions outlined by the standards (see Figure 2-18).

Teachers must make sure they understand the “what children need to learn, and then anticipate how they might learn these in the learning experience” (Helm, 2008). Making consolidated lists of the global standards, specific goals, and benchmarks helps teachers understand exactly what the standards indicate should be taught. These are the yardsticks against which children’s progress and learning will be measured. Generally, the standards give enough flexibility that teachers are able to introduce skills or information when they are most meaningful to children in the course of their activity and explorations. This is why many educators now speak of “negotiating play-based curriculum,” as teachers move back and forth mentally between the children’s play and projects while ensuring that they are progressing, learning, and growing in their knowledge and skills. The early learning standards give teachers the framework of remembering where they want to go, being intentional about what they do. Standards show us where we want to go. They don’t tell us how to get there. They don’t lay out a linear process. How teachers get there will be guided by their understanding of the children’s interests and questions. In Chapter 3,
we will explore more deeply the process by which teachers plan both to meet standards and to deepen and enrich children’s play. For now, let us briefly consider how teachers integrate play and learning standards.

One thing that teachers can do is called **backtracking**, which means that they consider all the important play and learning experiences that have gone on in the classroom, and see which of the standards have been met by the activities. This process connects the play and standards after the fact. When teachers know, for example, that children should develop familiarity with sounds in words, by listening to, identifying, recognizing, and discriminating sounds, they note that the rhyming word books they have read and the games they have played with words have helped support this learning. Or, remembering the measuring activities in making the class height chart, the teacher notes that the math standard for perceiving differences was at work. A class project of making pizza, planned after the teacher noticed the children making pizzas in the sandbox and at the play dough table, engaged the children in literacy activities as they followed a recipe, math as they counted and measured, and science as they stirred, baked, and witnessed the transformation of the ingredients into a delicious lunch. As the teacher backtracked through the standards, she found how very many of the language and literacy, math, science, social, and approach-to-learning foundations had been met through the activity. Observing and note taking, as well as evaluating lesson plans, help teachers assess children’s progress toward these goals, achieved through activity and engagement. Obviously, a first requirement for this kind of assessment is a thorough familiarity with the standards, and an understanding of their language that can be easily translated into the meaningful activity of the classroom.

Teachers also use the standards framework to plan intentionally. A teacher who plans to make water play with a variety of objects available is providing an enjoyable and appropriate experience for the children, and one that may spark their interest for further exploration. But she is also planning to observe how many of them grasp the concepts of sinking and floating, to see how much progress has been made toward the goal, under Scientific Thinking and Invention in the standards, of “identifying, discriminating, and making comparisons among objects by observing physical characteristics.”

In integrating play with early learning standards, teachers engage in a cycle of observing, assessing, thinking about children’s interests and questions, and deciding on materials and experiences that will help deepen children’s play, as they move toward the goals and objectives defined by the state. The cycle answers the argument that teachers can’t be sure their children are learning and progressing if young children “just play.” It is *not* just play, and in the complexity of negotiating a curriculum that meets the standards, teachers play many roles. Skilled decision making accompanies well-grounded intentionality, with teachers understanding child development and learning in general, their individual children, and the sequences in which a domain’s specific concepts and skills are learned, and employing a repertoire of teaching strategies (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

### Helping Families Understand the Power of Play

In the competitive environment of modern America, families are often most concerned about how to give their children a superior start to their education. When preschools and primary classes emphasize active learning through play, these families are often confused and doubtful of just how this helps their children. Administrators and teachers have an important role in helping families understand how play lays the best foundations for later learning.

There are several steps educators can take to help families come to appreciate the value of play in their children’s learning. First and foremost, teachers can make clear and tangible the real learning in play. Through pictures, videos, narratives, and displays or **documentation panels**, teachers can articulate the specific learning in block building, for example, or in a rich episode of dramatic play. Telling the story with enthusiasm helps parents see the development and learning that is taking place joyfully each day. (See Figure 2-19.)
Newsletters, bulletin boards, and traveling teacher journals can all be used to help parents keep up with the development and exploration of ideas through play. Parent workshops, where parents participate in play activities themselves, help families to experience the learning possibilities of play. Opportunities to observe in the classroom and then discuss their observations with teachers gives parents firsthand experiences that contribute to their growing understanding. Providing articles that describe some of the benefits of play defined by research offer a breadth of professional understanding that goes beyond the individual teacher or school. Sharing teacher methods of setting goals, planning appropriate play experiences, and monitoring progress reassures parents of teacher accountability.

As teachers themselves commit to the medium of play for optimum learning, they take every opportunity to share their knowledge and enthusiasm with families. Engaging in a continuous dialogue allows families to answer their questions and concerns, and to become proponents of best practices, as they in fact observe the results of rich play experiences. It is important for teachers to understand that the burden of family education lies with them, that families will not support or accept what they do not understand. An important teacher role is helping families come to respect and value the power of play.

For more about ways of achieving cooperation and communication with families, see Chapter 18, available only on the text Web site.

Later chapters will help deepen the basic ideas about other teacher roles in creating environments and providing appropriate intervention to support play. Teachers must realize the importance of appropriate play environments both indoors and outdoors (see Figure 2-16). What is most important at this point is to develop a respect for play as the most important thing children can do. Supporting and enhancing play is a teacher’s best work in developmentally appropriate classrooms.

The spontaneous play of young children is their highest achievement. In their play, children invent the world for themselves and create a place for themselves in it. They are re-creating their pasts and imagining their futures, while grounding themselves in the reality and fantasy of their lives here and now. Re-creating children’s play in her own words, the teacher shows respect for its integrity, while building on it as one of the shared, recurrent experiences out of which the group’s culture can grow. For this purpose, as well as for play’s inherent value for children, teachers need to pay attention to play. (Jones & Reynolds, 1992, p. 129)

**SUMMARY**

Play is pleasurable, spontaneous, self-motivated, integrative activity that provides a medium for learning and development in all domains. Several categories and stages of play have been identified. Play supports development and learning in all domains. Both Piaget and Vygotsky found that play supports optimum cognitive development. There are numerous reasons why play is the best medium for learning. Teachers can support the development of quality play by designing the physical environment and intervening appropriately. Teachers should understand that there are several issues to explore involving play, including the issue of violent play, cultural influences on play, play for children with special needs, integrating play with early learning standards, and helping families understand the importance of play.
THINK ABOUT IT ACTIVITIES

1. Observe a classroom of young children and try to find examples of each category of play: functional, constructive, dramatic, and games with rules. See if you can also find examples of all the kinds of social participation described in this chapter: onlooker, solitary, parallel, associative, and cooperative. Discuss your examples with a small group in your class.

2. During your classroom visit, try to determine what the classroom teacher does to support play. Consider aspects of the physical environment, such as definition and size of play spaces, quantity and kind of available materials, and time scheduled for play. Observe the teacher’s role during play. What kinds of interventions discussed in this chapter do you see?

3. Record several examples of children’s conversations during sociodramatic play. What are you learning about their understanding of the world through these conversations?

QUESTIONS TO ASSESS LEARNING OF CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

1. Define play, describing the key components involved.

2. Name and describe the four categories of children’s play. Give an example for each category. Name and describe the five stages of children’s social play. Give an example to illustrate each stage.

3. a. Discuss the ideas of Piaget related to play and cognitive development.
   b. Discuss the ideas of Vygotsky related to play and cognitive development.
   c. Describe the contributions of play to development in all domains.
   d. Identify several characteristics of play that make it the most appropriate curriculum for young children.

4. a. Describe factors in the physical environment of play that support quality play.
   b. Identify specific behaviors identified by Smilansky as appropriate teacher intervention.

5. Discuss ideas related to violent play, to cultural influences on play, to play for children with special needs, to integrating play and learning standards, and to helping families understand the importance of play.

APPLY YOUR KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONS

1. An inexperienced teacher asks you why her three-year-olds can’t follow the rules for traditional children’s games and why they don’t pick up on her suggestions for playing Chinese restaurant. What information would be helpful to her understanding?

2. The principal of the school where you teach kindergarten wants all play and free-choice time eliminated from your schedule, so you can concentrate on teaching academic skills. What documents and information might you share to explain your viewpoint that play is important in laying foundational skills?

HELPFUL WEB SITES

http://www.instituteforplay.com The Importance of Play Web site has much information about play.
http://www.playingforkeeps.org  The Playing for Keeps Web site has information and the latest research on play for parents and professionals.

http://www.eduref.org The Web site for the Educator’s Reference Desk has much information on a variety of topics. Click Program Areas, and then Child Care and Development to find articles about play. Search for an article from the ERIC Digest titled “Pretend Play and Young Children’s Development, 2001, PS029929.”

http://www.ncsu.edu The Web site for the International Association for the Child’s Right to Play offers its Declaration of the Child’s Right to Play.

http://www.naeyc.org The Web site for the National Association for the Education of Young Children has a forum on Play, Policy, and Practice. Click on Members Only, and then on Interest Forums.

http://www.researchconnections.org This Web site has much information, including about your state learning standards here.

Please visit the premium Web site for Developmentally Appropriate Practice, 4th edition, to access more chapter web links, suggestions for further research and study, additional book chapters, interactive quizzes, video exercises, online journal activities, flashcards, and much more!
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