

# DEBUNKING THE MYTHS OF PLAY



**World Forum For Early Care and Education's World Play working group has created *Debunking the Myths of Play* as a resource to support and inspire the early years community to define, advocate and strengthen play opportunities for children.**

In the context of this document the World Play working group defines play as:

*An innately driven purposeful learning experience where one interacts with the world around them to develop essential knowledge and skills for school, employment readiness and life.*

This document is intended for educators, teachers, administrators, families and community members to use as a resource to support their advocacy for play as a central part of the child's learning. It can be used at staff meetings, in newsletters to families and communities, to inform policy, support practice and to begin conversations to develop understandings of the role play has in developing each individual to their full potential.

*Play is the foundation of learning, creativity, self-expression, and constructive problem-solving. It's how children wrestle with life to make it meaningful. – Susan Linn, founding member of World Play.*

*Note: Quotes, weblink references and resources are found on the companion documents located on the World Forum's World Play website <https://worldforumfoundation.org/workinggroups/play/>*

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<p><b>Common Myth #1</b></p>	<p><b>Infants (Birth to 1 year) aren't old enough or don't know how to play</b></p> <p><b>Also, might be:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Infants don't have the social language skills to play.</i></li> <li>• <i>All infants do is eat, sleep &amp; poop - they don't play.</i></li> <li>• <i>How can infants play? They can't even talk yet.</i></li> <li>• <i>How can infants play? They don't have the physical ability to move and interact with others.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Reality</b></p>	<p>Around 28 weeks of a pregnancy, an infant begins interacting with outside stimuli such as a gentle push against the stomach from the parent after they feel a kick, and then they respond with another movement (Australian Government, n.d.). This is early development of the serve and return phenomena as infants learn to interact and play with those around them.</p> <p>Therefore, infants are born to play as they explore the world around them by using all their senses. For example, an infant will babble and then pause for a reaction from others, this is known as serve and return (Harvard University, 2022), as they use this playful process to begin to develop speech in their native dialect.</p> <p><i>“Biologically, the brain is prepared to be shaped by experience. It's expecting the experiences that a young child has to literally influence the formation of its circuitry.” – Jack Shonkoff</i></p> <p>Infants will often drop items and wait for someone to pick it up and give it back to them, only to drop it yet again. This is the playful interaction of understanding cause and effect and object permanence (Piaget, 1969), but also developing the social skills of interacting with others.</p> <p>Infants love to play and it's a great way to bond! Even a simple game of peekaboo can leave your infant giggling and smiling.</p> <p><i>“Infancy is a time of great dependence. Nevertheless, babies should be allowed to do things for themselves from the very beginning.” – Magda Gerber</i></p>

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## Resources to Promote Change

### HOW TO ADVOCATE

Share information about brain development and developmental milestones with families, community members, administrators, policymakers, and politicians.

- When Do Babies Begin To Learn  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nlv10j7\\_bjE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nlv10j7_bjE)
- Boosting Brain Development  
<https://www.unicef.org/parenting/child-development/building-babies-brains-through-play-class>
- Developmental Milestones Birth to 2  
<https://www.unicef.org/parenting/child-development/your-babys-developmental-milestones>

Highlight the importance of nurturing home environments and interactions.

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/serve-return-interaction-shapes-brain-circuitry/>

Share with everyone the science and stages of play.

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/series/the-development-of-play-skills-from-birth-to-3>

### PRACTICAL IDEAS TO PLAY AT HOME & IN THE COMMUNITY

Encourage pregnant parents to interact and play with their baby in utero. This can be done through touch, singing, and reading.

- 10 Ways to Bond with Your Baby <https://www.babycentre.co.uk/a1049630/10-ways-to-bond-with-your-baby-bump>
- Play and make games with your babies. <https://www.unicef.org/parenting/child-care/toys-life>

Share with families the learning and skills infants are building as they play and interact. Give them things to look for.

*Examples* - See how his eyes look back at you to see if you will do it again? He's learning how to play with you.

Did you see how she is trying to reach for the blanket? That is her practicing to reach for things.

Remember when he couldn't do that? Now he does it all of the time.

Noticing serves and return them <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/>

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## PRACTICAL IDEAS TO SUPPORT PLAY AT SCHOOL

Talk with your teaching team about what development you are seeing with your babies, as well as teachers making notes for families.

Share with families by making notes about the games and routines you play with their infants so they can play them too.

Use your infant routines, such as feeding and toileting, as opportunities for play. For example, when changing infants, take a moment to play peek-a-boo; sing a song; recite a poem, giving them a moment to respond and practice the serve and return. Harvard Center for the Developing Child <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/>

## RESEARCH AND RESOURCES TO SHARE

Harvard Center for the Developing Child - Serve and Return Video [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m\\_5u8-QSh6A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_5u8-QSh6A)

UNICEF - When Do Babies Begin To Learn Video [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlvI0j7\\_bjE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlvI0j7_bjE)

Zero to Three - From Feelings To Friendships, Healthy Social Emotional Development Downloadable Tip Sheet <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/30-from-feelings-to-friendships-nurturing-healthy-social-emotional-development-in-the-early-years>

The basic architecture of the brain is constructed through a process that begins early in life and continues into adulthood. Simpler circuits come first and more complex brain circuits build on them later. Genes provide the basic blueprint, but experiences influence how or whether genes are expressed. Together, they shape the quality of brain architecture and establish either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the learning, health, and behavior that follow. Plasticity, or the ability for the brain to reorganize and adapt, is greatest in the first years of life and decreases with age.

UNICEF - <https://www.unicef.org/parenting/child-development/when-do-babies-begin-to-learn>

Master Class, Building Baby's Brain Video

<https://www.unicef.org/parenting/child-development/building-babies-brains-through-play-class>

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<p><b>Common Myth #2</b></p>	<p><b>Play is a waste of time and frivolous</b></p> <p><i>Also, might be:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Children do not learn anything when they are playing.</i></li> <li>• <i>Play has no purpose.</i></li> <li>• <i>There is no time for play in our schedule.</i></li> <li>• <i>Children can play on their own time.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Reality</b></p>	<p>Through play and interactions with the world around them, children are building the foundations of the brain. During these experiences the brain is physically building new structures and connections as the child gains new understandings and develops new ideas.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“Play is not frivolous: it enhances brain structure and function and promotes executive function (i.e., the process of learning, rather than the content), which allow us to pursue goals and ignore distractions.”</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>– Yogman et. Al.</i></p> <p>While play builds the physical development of the brain, it also builds the social and emotional skills needed to have successful relationships with all community members. Through play children learn to analyze, reason, develop appropriate responses and actions for the situation and to listen to other points of view.</p> <p>Play can be purely focused on the experience itself and have no predetermined purpose, however, all play is purposeful within the experience itself. Play helps to build concentration, persistence, resilience and confidence. These are key social, emotional and academic skills to be successful in both work and their day-to-day life.</p> <p>In 1989 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), with all countries with the exception of the United States of America, having signed and ratified these rights. Of the 42 rights held by children aged under 18 years, Article 31 states that children have the right to play and relax. This requires play to be central to their daily experiences, and thus should be part of the educational and care program.</p>

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The experience of play helps children develop their own sense of self and understanding of their place in the world as they interact with others and the world around them. Through play children have the opportunity to try out new ideas, take risks, experience the result, and thus learn through trial and error. This is the scientific method in action that many of the great minds in history have taken as well as in today's world.

*“Decades of research has shown that play is crucial to physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development at all ages. This is especially true of the purest form of play: the unstructured, self-motivated, imaginative, independent kind, where children initiate their own games and even invent their own rules.” – David Elkind*

## Resources to Promote Change

### HOW TO ADVOCATE

Share information about brain development and developmental milestones to families, community members, administrators, policymakers, and politicians.

Highlight the importance of social emotional development as the framework which is built through play and provides the foundational skills for life success. <https://www.zerotothree.org/espanol/social-and-emotional-development>  
Zero to Three

Promote the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - Particularly, article 31 (Help others make connections between this and practice through the practical ideas below). Zero to Three <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>  
International Play Association - The Child's Right To Play <http://ipaworld.org/childs-right-to-play/the-childs-right-to-play/>

How Babies Learn Through Play

<https://www.unicef.org/parentingtips/how-babies-learn-through-play>

How To Raise Resilient Children In A Fear-Based World - Lukas Ritson TEDTalk [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cpTDz\\_-1Is](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cpTDz_-1Is)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdeK4B3BbM4&t=182s>

UNICEF

Share everywhere the importance of play. - Peter Gray's TedTalk

The Decline of Play and Rise in Mental Disorders <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bg-GEzM7iTk>

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## PRACTICAL IDEAS TO PLAY AT HOME & IN THE COMMUNITY

Share tips and strategies with families and communities about the role of play at events such as parent nights and parenting classes. Get creative and build new partnerships such as with local faith groups. <https://www.unicef.org/parenting/master-classes>

Observe children at play, see how they are problem solving, role playing, interacting with the materials and demonstrating and building skills and knowledge. Point out to others the foundations children are building such as problem solving and persistence. Planning For and Documenting Children's Learning - See and Say The Learning. Connect children's play activities to foundational skill building and practice like grouping by size is pre-algebra! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91o85mky6D0>

## PRACTICAL IDEAS TO SUPPORT PLAY AT SCHOOL

Assess current scheduling and practices at school for a balance of child initiated and adult guided activities. Getting the right balance between adult-led and child-initiated learning. Review materials to ensure opportunities are available to practice the next level skills, such as puzzles.

Optimus Education Blog - <https://blog.optimus-education.com/getting-right-balance-between-adult-led-and-child-initiated-learning>

Look and watch children at play, see how they are problem solving, role playing, interacting with the materials, and demonstrating and building skills and knowledge. Observe children at play to determine their current developmental levels and set goals, activities and materials to individualize your support as they practice toward mastering their age appropriate skills and abilities. Queensland CAA - Documenting Children's Learning - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91o85mky6D0>

## RESEARCH AND RESOURCES TO SHARE

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

UNICEF - How Babies Learn Through Play <https://www.unicef.org/parentingtips/how-babies-learn-through-play>

Zero to Three: What are the most important changes in the brain after birth?

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1379-what-are-the-most-important-changes-in-the-brain-after-birth>

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<p><b>Common Myth #3</b></p>	<p><b>Children will not learn anything on their own</b></p> <p><i>Might also be:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Children need adult set up play, not free play.</i></li> <li>• <i>Children need adults to teach them the knowledge and skills they need.</i></li> <li>• <i>Children need to be explicitly taught appropriate behavior.</i></li> <li>• <i>Children need to learn their place.</i></li> <li>• <i>Play will not help children achieve the learning standards.</i></li> <li>• <i>Teachers must cover all areas of development on their lesson plans.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Reality</b></p>	<p>As stated in the above myth, play can be purely focused on the experience itself and have no predetermined purpose, however, all play is purposeful within the experience itself.</p> <p>Children naturally interact with others and the world around them through play. It is through this process that children discover new ideas and understanding, explore new concepts, and make connections to knowledge already gained. They do not necessarily need adults to set up play, rather they need adults to support and provide time for play so they can explore, discover, and learn.</p> <p>Play helps to build concentration, persistence, resilience, and confidence. These are key social, emotional, and academic skills to be successful in both work and their day-to-day life. It is through the building of these skills that children learn appropriate social behavior as they interact with others, including peers and adults in a variety of situations and contexts.</p> <p>Adults can assist making connections and opportunities in learning by asking open ended questions, considering other options, encouraging children to think, and to take safe risks in their play to learn more.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“An amalgamated research field called the science of learning has identified four key ingredients of successful learning: learning occurs best when children are mentally active (not passive), engaged (not distracted), socially interactive (with peers or adults), and building meaningful connections to their lives.” Hirsh-Pasek et al.</i></p>



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Teachers and adults through their observation and documentation of children’s play can identify key connections to curriculum standards and targeted learning outcomes which they are working to assist children to achieve in school settings.

Play in the school setting involves a variety of circumstances including free play, loose parts, interacting with educational toys, structured games, purposely designed interactive materials and play-based learning activities.

*“If formal instruction is introduced too early, too intensely and too abstractly, the children may indeed learn the instructed knowledge and skills, but they may do so at the expense of the disposition to use them.” – Lillian Katz*

When children are engaged in free play they are engaging in the foundational concepts of math, science, language, creativity, social skills, and emotional regulation. It is the role of the adult/teacher in these situations in the school setting to intentionally provide materials, time, and look for appropriate opportunities to support the learning by helping children make connections, learn new skills with support and then provide opportunity to engage in the process until mastery has been achieved. Vygotsky calls this the role of the More Knowledgeable Other as the child works within their Zone of Proximal Development (McLeod, 2019).

In this Zone of Proximal Development, the role of the adult is to see where a child is struggling to learn something new or what to do next, and to offer advice and support to the child by scaffolding their play until they can master the skill or knowledge they are seeking. It is not about giving them the right answer, rather about assisting them to problem solve, make connections, and build knowledge themselves.

*“Early childhood is a time of tremendous brain development. The young brain literally changes shape and size in response to everything encountered in the early years. New environments, life experiences, caretakers, and relationships can all affect the way complex brain circuits are wired. This network of synaptic connections will ultimately determine brain function and the development of behavior.” – Pamela Li*

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## Resources to Promote Change

### HOW TO ADVOCATE

Know the science behind early care and education. Demonstrate and share the skills and knowledge with families, co-workers, administrators, and policy makers. <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/may2017/case-brain-science-guided-play>

Invite school administrators and public officials into your program, connect children at play with your country's education standards and goals, show the connection to your program.

UNICEF Early Learning Development Standards for Children <https://evaluationreports.unicef.org/GetDocument?fileID=9571>

Play in Early Childhood: The Role of Play in Any Setting <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjoyBZYk2zI>

Partner with local architects and community partners to Designing Inspiring and Effective Spaces for Children World Forum Working Group - <https://worldforumfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/5022458.pdf>

### PRACTICAL IDEAS TO PLAY AT HOME & IN THE COMMUNITY

See and Say the Learning - highlight the early academic skills children are building as they play such as algebra! When children are *grouping by attributes* cars, animals, leaves, rocks... this is foundation algebra. Share with families how everyday items at home provide rich play opportunities and are essential to learning foundations.

Gather math games and activities resources for your program and specially to share with families. Give families tips to boost math at the store or market, petrol or gas station, pet store, family gatherings, etc. <https://nrich.maths.org/early-years-old>

Share toys and games you can make and do at home using Loose Parts to build and support exploring play-based learning opportunities in all areas of development. Explain the Cradle Through Career idea of children's play builds the foundations for school and life. Examples – Rhyming games, making up stories from pictures, playing family and cultural games, singing songs, drawing and painting, playing with letters and numbers...

Nature Play SA <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/npsa-familyday-care-loose-parts.pdf>

Toys You Can Make at Home – UNICEF <https://www.unicef.org/parenting/child-care/toys-life>

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## PRACTICAL IDEAS TO SUPPORT PLAY AT SCHOOL

Provide a wide variety of language with children attaching words to actions and objects, even with small babies. Each time makes a connection in the brain. The more the connections, the more information children are storing to apply to new learning and skills. Give a summary after children are finished playing or an activity to reinforce what they are learning or skill practicing.

Set up a variety of materials to experiment with, use the scientific process of I wonder what might happen... What is happening... What do you think just happened. End with a summary such as, "So you said when you put the rocks into the water, the water splashes over the sides, do you think everything will make the water splash over? Let's find out."

Intentionally discover and talk about math to build vocabulary with all ages as much as possible as they play and explore. Expand vocabulary, higher/shorter, heavier/lighter, less/more, few/many... in front of/behind, on top of/underneath, above/below...

Count and touch each item with children and always end with the final number you have counted. (Cardinality) 1,2,3.. That is 3.

Provide a variety of loose parts to enable children to create and experiment with properties and attributes with natural objects such as leaves, rocks, pebbles, twigs, pine cones, and other objects that can have a variety of different uses. Exploring and experimenting with loose parts builds cooperation skills, problem solving, small and large motor skills, creativity, art, science, math, analysis and reasoning and opportunities for unlimited possibilities to play.

Nature Play SA <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/npsa-familyday-care-loose-parts.pdf>

Review your program to provide children with time, freedom and possibilities.

How To Raise Resilient Children In A Fear-Based World - Lukas Ritson TedTalk [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cpTDz\\_-1Is](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cpTDz_-1Is)

The Intentional Teacher - Choosing the Best Strategies for Young Children's Learning

Ann S. Epstein NAEYC <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/books/intentional-teacher-revised-edition>

Observe and document children's development and skill mastery to individualize lessons and activities.

Documenting Children's Learning <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdOqkukZikE>

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## RESEARCH AND RESOURCES TO SHARE

Cumbria Council, UK - Culture influences all aspects of early development through child-rearing beliefs and practices.  
<https://www.cumbria.gov.uk/elibrary/Content/Internet/537/3953/4202/7088/42563164148.pdf?timestamp=42627367>

Harvard Center for the Developing Child - How Children and Adults Can Build Core Capabilities for Life  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NehuwDA45Q>

UNICEF - Learning Through Play - Strengthening Learning Through Play in Early Childhood education programmes <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/UNICEF-Lego-Foundation-Learning-through-Play.pdf>

Harvard Center for the Developing Child - Balancing adversaries and building resilience for young children resources and videos  
<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-resilience-series/>

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