

The “Why,” the “What,” and the “How” of Purposeful Play

The “Why”	Much research supports the “why” or value of play. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2018) states that active play is fundamental to children’s health. Their statement asserts play helps children learn how to solve problems, negotiate, develop creativity and self-regulation abilities, as well as ensures a strong start to language and cognitive skills. Lester and Russell (2018) contend play has a way of shaping the brain, and of maintaining its plasticity and potential of a positive emotional orientation and disposition toward interactions within one’s environment. Play actually takes many forms—constructive, fantasy, and games with rules—with each form characterized by unique learning benefits. Teachers can intentionally design learning experiences by encompassing these and other types of play.
The “What”	Supported by Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social learning theory, guided or purposeful play combines the joyful aspects of free play through adult scaffolding of opportunities that offer a child increased exploration of a context, specifically designed to foster a learning goal. Edwards (2017) explains that Vygotsky believed a key human activity for generating new ideas and representations in learning is known as reproductive activity. Reproductive activity occurs when children respond to their environment by drawing from and relating what they have experienced. Because Vygotsky believed that children create new thinking by drawing from their realities, the richer the child’s world, the greater the potential for generating ideas. Teachers or adults located in a child’s play offer more “fodder” for the child to draw from. Thus, purposefully designing play situations by providing materials, ideas, questions, and experiences gives children MORE information to pull from and investigate.
The “How”	Implementing guided or purposeful play begins with the teacher’s (a) mindset that play and joy should be the interconnecting threads of all the teacher does in the classroom (Mraz, Porcelli, & Tyler, 2016); (b) knowing the standards; (c) data collection and analysis of results aligned to a given curriculum; and (d) organization of classroom space for the provision of materials, ideas, and experiences that support learning goals.

References

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