



Early Childhood Educator Workshop

LEARNING TO PLAY, PLAYING TO LEARN

Featuring Dr. Peg Oliveira, PhD
Director, Gesell Program in Early Childhood
Yale Child Study Center

Saturday, November 15, 2025



Thank you to our sponsors: Indian River
County Children's Services Advisory
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Peg Oliveira, PhD
Director, Gesell Program in Early Childhood
Yale Child Study Center

peg@gesellinstitute.org

Dr. Peg Oliveira is the Director of the Gesell Program in Early Childhood at the Yale Child Study Center. A developmental psychologist by training, she has built a career at the intersection of advocacy, social activism, and education.

Dr. Oliveira writes for national publications and contributes to educational texts, while also designing professional development programs that have a direct and lasting impact on how educators and parents understand and support children's development.

She earned her doctorate from Brandeis University and has collaborated with state agencies, national advocacy coalitions, and local initiatives to promote access to high-quality early learning experiences for all children.

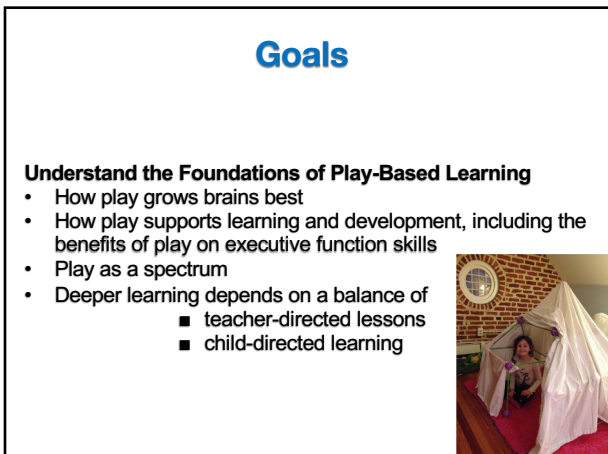
In addition to her work in early childhood education, Dr. Oliveira has been a beloved yoga teacher in her hometown of New Haven, Connecticut, for over two decades. She is the founder of 108 Monkeys, a nonprofit yoga service organization dedicated to making yoga accessible to all.



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Child Development 101



All children develop through sequential and predictable stages of development.

Children develop at their own unique, individual rate.

Children's developmental age (stage) can differ from their chronological age.

Development is impacted by internal (heredity) and external (environment) influences.

4

Sooner ~~≠~~ Better

"There is no research showing long-term advantages to reading at 5 compared to reading at 6 or 7."

"The research is clear. Faster is not better when it comes to early education; young children need play and hands-on interactions for genuine learning to occur."

*Crisis in the Kindergarten
2009*

5

Even for Reading Sooner ~~≠~~ Better!

"Equal, or even greater, long-term reading achievement can result despite delaying reading instruction by nearly two years" or from 5 to 7 years of age.

By about age 10, children learning to read at age 7 had caught up to those learning at age 5. "Later starters had no long-term disadvantages and for whatever reason, **the later starters had slightly better reading comprehension.**"

*Suggate, S.P. et al.
Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 28(1), 33-48.*

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Is Kindergarten the New 1st Grade? Univ. of Virginia, 2016

Found that kindergarten teachers in 2010 had much **higher expectations of their students than teachers in 1998** and their classrooms had become more similar to first-grade classes from the '90s.

Teachers in 2010 were much more likely to believe academic instruction should begin before kindergarten, including a **33 percent increase in the number of teachers who believed students should know the alphabet and how to use a pencil before beginning kindergarten**.

Teachers in 2010 were also **significantly more likely to think students should leave kindergarten knowing how to read**.

Many of the changes the researchers found track with what was expected of students under the No Child Left Behind Act, the 2001-era federal K-12 law that required schools to assess students in math and reading beginning in third grade. As a result, the researchers found, **the amount of time spent on reading and math instruction increased, particularly on skills that in 1998 were considered too advanced for kindergarten**.

AERA Jan. 6, 2016

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Is Kindergarten the New 1st Grade? Univ. of Virginia, 2016

Decrease in time spent teaching **art**

The number of teachers reporting **daily music instruction decreased** by 18 percentage points, and daily art instruction decreased by 16 percentage points.

In a similar vein, **the number of teachers who spent at least one hour per day on child-selected activities dropped by 14 percentage points** and the likelihood that classrooms had **discovery or play areas such as a sand table, science area or art area, fell by over 20 percentage points**.

AERA Jan. 6, 2016

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2332658415616358>

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What
grows
brains
best?

► Normal growth and development.

are, consistent, and continuing
experiences, including
especially physical ones, with
others and with the world that are
both:

- Self Initiated
- Other Initiated

PLAY

9

How do children learn best?

- Active: Processing information, applying it and digesting through application, not just reading, observing or being lectured to (baby college)

PLAY

- Iteration: New knowledge based on existing knowledge
- Joy!: Positive affect is linked to increased executive function skills, academic outcomes and brain flexibility

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Learning is Iterative Piaget

Cannot learn

Cannot truly learn something that has no connection.

Accom. Equil. Assim.

Accom. Equil. Assim.

Accom. Equil. Assim.

Accom. Equil. Assim.

Accom. Equil. Assim.

Like stair-steps we construct new knowledge on existing knowledge.

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Vygotsky: Socio/Cultural Cognitive Theory of Learning

ZPD

I Can Do It

I Can Do It With Help

I Can't Do It

Lev Vygotsky explained that the Zone of Proximal Development is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers."

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"For children to learn best, they need to play."

"This is not a fringe option, or a liberal or conservative opinion, or an idea that is relevant only to certain eras, cultures, or countries; it is today a settled, global consensus among leading educators, childhood development experts, researchers, and pediatricians - for children to learn best, they need to play."

– Pasi Sahlberg & William Doyle
"Let the Children Play"

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Does Play = Learning?

Children matched for IQ were placed in one of three types of preschool programs:

- Traditional play-based,
- Montessori, or
- Didactic (emphasizing academics)

Findings in Middle School:

- Play-based and Montessori were more effective in promoting academic achievement
- Better math and reading achievement
- Most significant for males.

Child Development (1983)

"Long-Term Effects of Four Preschool Programs: 6th 7th and 8th Grades"

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Does Play = Learning?

Several studies comparing children who attended preschool with an academic orientation with comparable children who attended a play-based program.

- No later academic advantage for the children who attended the academic program.
- Some evidence that children in the academic program demonstrated higher levels of test anxiety, were less creative, and had more negative attitudes toward school than did the children attending the play-based program.

Hirsh-Pasek, K. (1991)

*Pressure or Challenge in Preschool:
How Academic Programs Affect Children*

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Does Play = Learning?

High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study Through Age 23:

61 lower-income children had distinctly better life outcomes when they had a play-based early education vs. a more formalized and "academic" one.

(1997)

Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 12(2) 117-143

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Does Play = Learning?

"Children's later school success appears to be enhanced by more active, child-initiated learning experiences. Their long-term progress may be slowed by overly academic, preschool experiences that introduce formalized learning experiences too early for most children's developmental status."

"Pushing children too soon may actually backfire when children move into the later elementary school grades and are required to think more independently."

Marcon (2002)

Early Childhood Research & Practice, 4(1), n1

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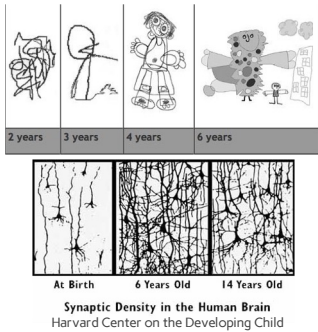
American Academy of Pediatrics

Prescription: PLAY!

The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children, 2018

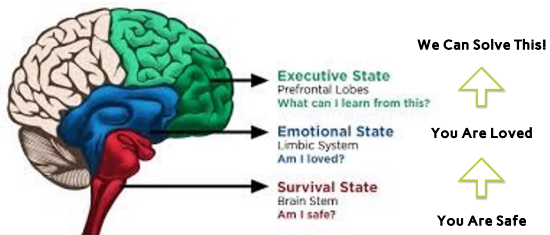
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The Brain



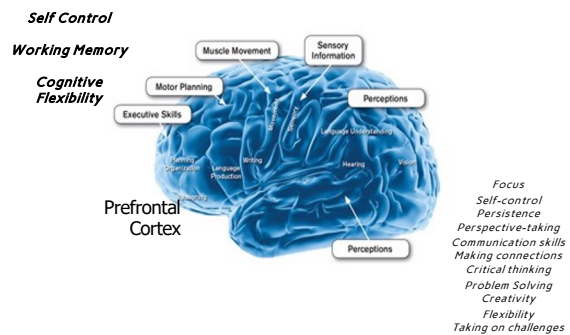
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Regulate from the Bottom to the Top



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Executive Function



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A Window of Opportunity

A range of tests measuring different forms of executive function skills indicate that they begin to develop shortly after birth,

with ages 3 to 5 providing an important window of opportunity for dramatic growth in these skills.

Growth continues throughout adolescence and early adulthood; proficiency begins to decline later in life.

http://developingchild.harvard.edu/key_concepts/brain_architecture/

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6 C's

1. Communication
2. Collaboration
3. Critical Thinking
4. Confidence
5. Creative Innovation
6. Content

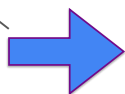
Becoming Brilliant
Golinkoff & Pasek (2016)

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The Path to the 6 C's

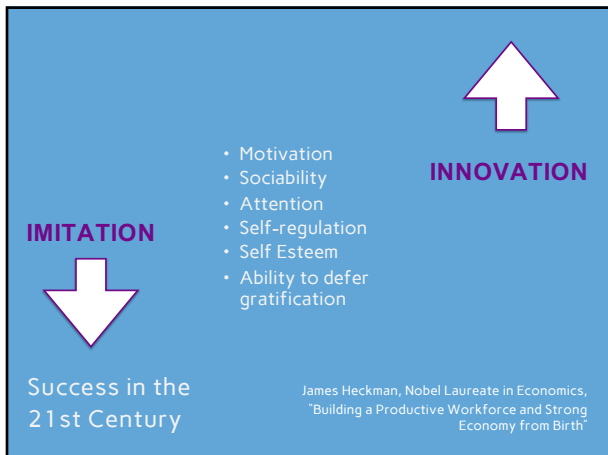
TEACHER
CONTROL

STUDENT
CHOICE



1. Communication
2. Collaboration
3. Critical Thinking
4. Confidence
5. Creative Innovation
6. Content

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Defining a Pedagogy of Play

What does a pedagogy of play **look** like?

What does a pedagogy of play **sound** like?

What does a pedagogy of play **feel** like?

*Pedagogy:
the method and practice of teaching*

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Defining a Pedagogy of Play

Play

Wonder

Purpose

Joy

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Teaching Practices that Support a Pedagogy of Play

1. Empower learners to lead their own learning
2. Build a culture of collaborative learning
3. Promote experimentation and risk-taking
4. Encourage imaginative thinking
5. Welcome all emotions generated through play

*Project Zero
Harvard Graduate School of Education*

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But how do we
operationally define...

PLAY

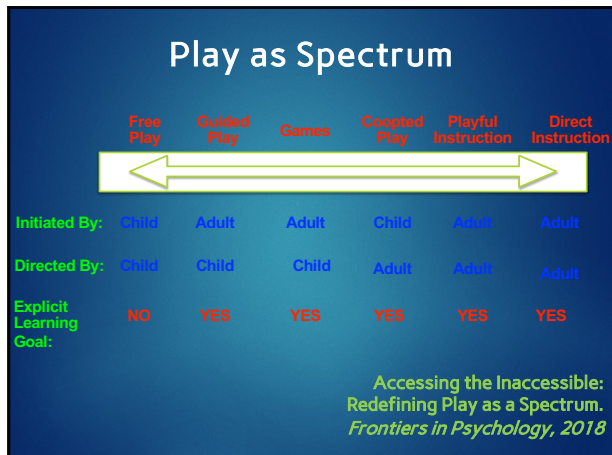
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Free Play
as "Gold
Standard"
of Play

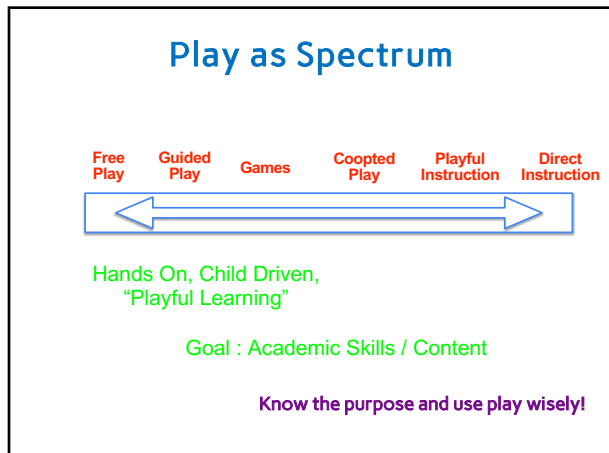


Play as a
Spectrum

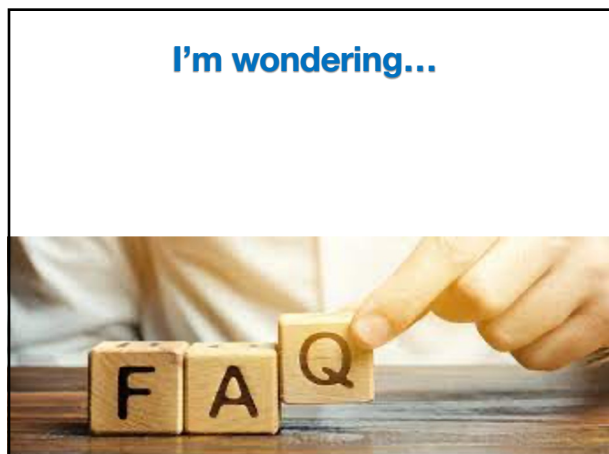
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Are you arguing for 100% play-based schools?

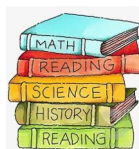
No.

We are advocating for a balanced recipe between play and other teaching methods, including direct instruction that can together best support meeting explicit learning goals.

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What about the curriculum?

**Play-Based Learning is....
Agnostic on Curriculum**

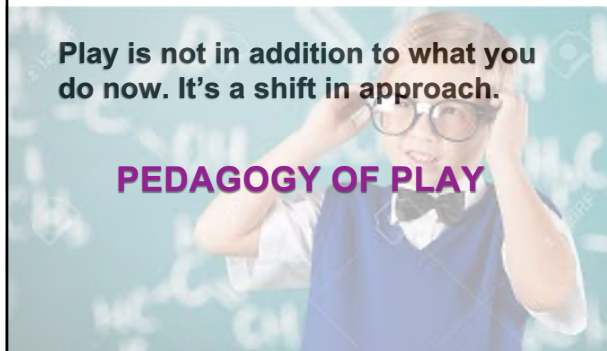


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How do I find the time?

Play is not in addition to what you do now. It's a shift in approach.

PEDAGOGY OF PLAY



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What about standards?

**Play is the method we use
to move toward standards.**



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What about assessment?

Play is the assessment!

Good observation of children in play, either chosen by the child or with carefully chosen materials or intentionally designed experiences offers all the data needed to assess a child's skills, knowledge and developmental stage.

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Is this evidence based?

Research Confirms Benefits of Play-Based Learning on Academic Outcomes

- Supported children to develop executive function skills (EF); e.g., self control, memory and cognitive flexibility
- EF skills highly correlated with positive outcomes in math and reading
- With playful learning *throughout the day*, standardized tests scores increase -- even for high risk children

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Is this evidence based?

Bodrova, Elena; Leong, Deborah J.; Hensen, Ruth; Henninger, Maddie (2000). Imaginative, child-directed play: Leading the way in development and learning. *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, v28 n4 p25-30
Ginsburg, K. R., the Committee on Communications, & the Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family

Health. (2007). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds. *Pediatrics* 119 (1): 182-191.

Hirsh-Pasek, K., & R.M. Golinkoff. 2008. "Why play = learning." In *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online], eds. R.E. Tremblay, M. Boivin, & R.D. Peters, topic ed. P.K. Smith, 1-6. Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development and Strategic Knowledge Cluster on Early Child Development.

Shaheen S. (2014). How child's play impacts executive function--related behaviors. *Applied Neuropsychology: Child*, 5(3), 182-187.

Skene, K., O'Farrelly, C. M., Byrne, E. M., Kirby, N., Stevens, E. C., & Ramchandani, P. G. (2022). Can guidance during play enhance children's learning and development in educational contexts? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child Development*, 93, 1162- 1180.

Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R. M., Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, & Council on Communications and Media. (2018). The power of play: A pediatric role in enhancing development in young children. *Pediatrics*, 142(3), 1-17.

40

How can I learn more? Resources

Becoming Brilliant (2016) Golinkoff, R.M. & Hirsh-Pasek, K.

Making Schools Work (2023) Hirsh-Pasek, K & Golinkoff, R.M., et al.

Exploring Play. (2015) National Association for the Education of Young Children.

A Pedagogy of Play: Supporting playful learning in classrooms and schools! (2023) Project Zero. Harvard Graduate School of Education (pz.harvard.edu)

Let the Children Play. (2019) Sahlberg, P. & Doyle, W.

The Power of Play. (2007) Elkind, D.

The High Quality Early Learning Project (highqualityearlylearning.org)

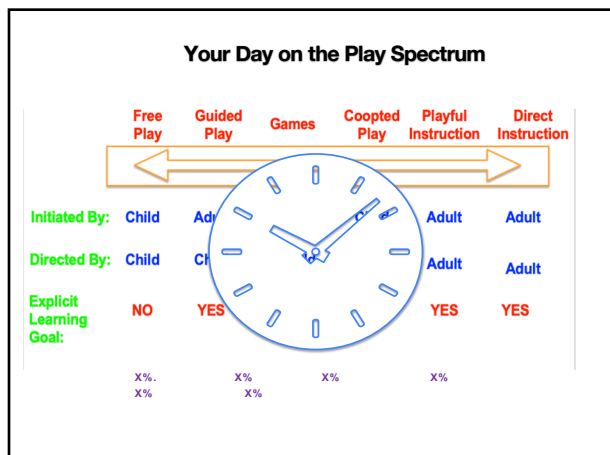
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Now you...

Assess your play in a day

- What percentage of your day is spent in each area of the play spectrum?
- Consider if that's the right balance to achieve your goals, or if you want to shift time.
- What would you do differently to achieve the desired balance?

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Gesell at Yale

Program in Early Childhood

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1

Your Day on the Play Spectrum

	Free Play	Guided Play	Games	Coopted Play	Playful Instruction	Direct Instruction
Initiated By:	Child	Adult	Adult	Child	Adult	Adult
Directed By:	Child	Child	Child	Adult	Adult	Adult
Explicit Learning Goal:	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
	X%	X%	X%	X%	X%	X%

2

Goals

Understand How to Design Play-Based Learning Experiences

- Understand the role of the Environment, the Teacher, & the Child
- When to Play & When to Get Out of the Way

“The job of grown-ups, in this framing, is to create environments that support children’s innate curiosity and, as much as possible, to stay out of the way.”

Peter Gray
Boston College

3

Sparkling Wonder = Interactions by Environment, Teacher, and Child



4

The Environment

Materials

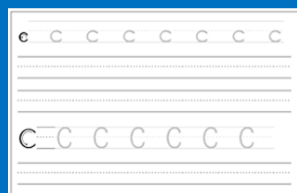
Art center
Writing (prewriting)
Library / book nook
Construction and tinkering
Blocks and building manipulatives
Mathematical reasoning games
Music & listening activities
Science and nature center (labs)



5

The Environment

Worksheets
Copying
Pre-determined art projects
Games with rigid rules
Flashcards



6

The Environment

OPEN → CLOSED

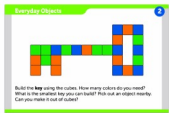


Loose Parts Library



7

Open or Closed?



8

How might you make this more open?
More closed?



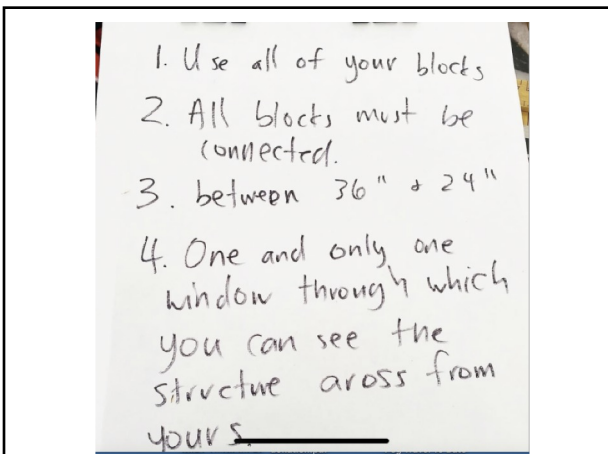
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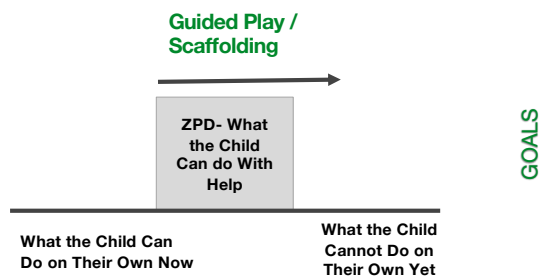
Sparking Wonder: The Role of the Teacher The Zone of Proximal Development



Lev Vygotsky explained that the Zone of Proximal Development is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers."

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Sparking Wonder: The Role of the Teacher "The More Knowledgeable Other"



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How? The Guide on the Side

- Playing alongside children
- Modeling
- Reflecting with children about their play
- Providing provocations and challenges
- Scaffolding: Materials, Dialogue/Inquiry
- Extending play/learning

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A wooden surface with various objects and their corresponding labels on white cards. The objects and labels are arranged in two columns. The left column contains a yellow pencil, a blue eraser, a brown pig, a green pear, and a black panther. The right column contains a white card, a panda, a silver pot, a red pumpkin, and a white card. The labels are: peg, pin, pig, pear, panther, pad, panda, pot, pumpkin.

- Assess the learners experience with content
- Relate content to what students can do - DAP
- Break tasks into smaller pieces with opportunity for intermittent feedback

[illegible]

A wooden letterbox with 26 compartments containing lowercase letters. Below it are three words: 'pit', 'net', and 'pot', each with a corresponding picture and a number card.

[illegible]

Teacher X Environment = Scaffolding Dialogue



To Scaffold the Dialogue:

- Use verbal cues and prompts to assist students
- Promote inquiry - What would happen if....?
- Promote evaluation - How is this one different? How is this one the same?
- Promote application - We know that puppies are mammals, what other mammals can we think of?
- Promote creation: What else can we add here?

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The Child

→ Learning is based on the interests of the children -
Children's interests help to create curriculum

→ Children construct/co-create their own knowledge
through a carefully planned curriculum that engages
and builds upon the child's current knowledge

→ Teaching becomes a two-way relationship in which
the teacher's understanding of the child is just as
important as the child's understanding of the
teacher

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What is your goal?

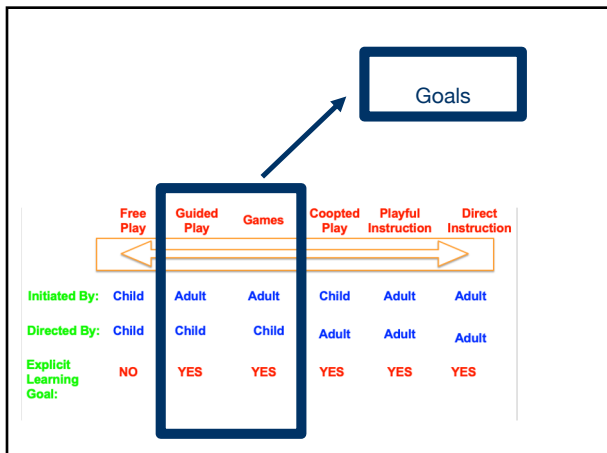


*"It's always 'Sit,' 'Stay,' 'Heel'—never
'Think,' 'Innovate,' 'Be yourself.'"*

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Provocation Stations

Creating enticing environments using intentionally chosen or found materials to nudge children toward inquiry in the direction of the development of a skill/ability or toward an explicit learning goal.

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Provocation Stations

Child
Teacher
Environment

- **Student-directed** learning; students responsible for own learning
- Governed by a **clear set of boundaries** that the students understand
- **Differentiated**; students can **revisit** curriculum at their own pace
- Contain manipulatives, materials and other instructional tools; **hands-on**
- Provide the **time and space** students need to complete the work
- Can be **independent work, group work, or mix of both**
- Can vary on the spectrum of **open to closed**

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When Setting Up Provocations, Ask Yourself

- ☐ What are students learning?
- ☐ How does this link to goals?
- ☐ How long (weeks, days, hours) will this station be open?
Make sure time at a station is DAP.
- ☐ How many students will be at a station at a time?
- ☐ How long will students be at each station?
- ☐ How will students select and enter/leave a station?
- ☐ Where are they located in the classroom to provide enough space?
- ☐ What rules will we create and how will we communicate them to keep students safe and successful at the station?

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When Introducing New Provocations

- **Take time** with whole class to **introduce the activities** in a new station - give a tour of the station for clear expectations
- **Rules/best practices** are **posted and reviewed** before and during work cycle
 - Use **positive rules** that set goals - Be courteous, Do your best work, share, move mindfully, use learning volume voices



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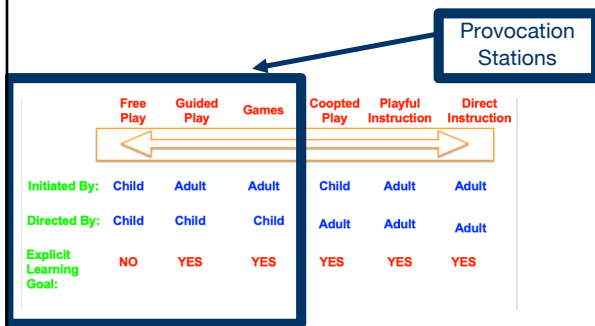
Provocations built for the way children learn best are...

- Active
- Engaged
- Meaningful
- Social
- Iteration
- Joy!



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Provocation Stations & Play Spectrum



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Now you...

In your group/pairs

- Design a provocation station that **BUILDS TOWARD** A goal (standards, developmental skills, content/knowledge...)

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For example...

Goal:

Measurement & Data: Measure lengths indirectly and by iterating length units.

Provocation Station:

Measuring plants

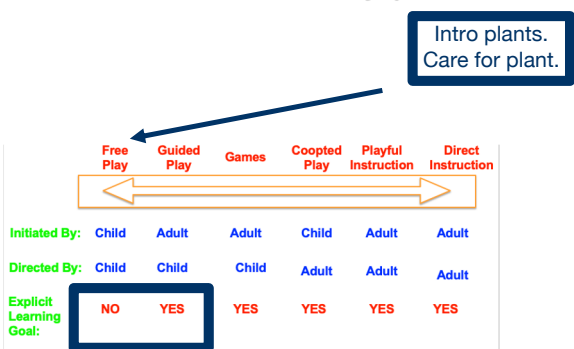
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- Introduce plants
- Care
- Name
- Identify / label



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Provocation Stations & Play Spectrum



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- Measure the plants using Unifix cubes.
- Graph results
- Which are taller and by how much?

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Provocation Stations & Play Spectrum

Measure the plants

Free Play

Guided Play

Games

Coopted Play

Playful Instruction

Direct Instruction

Initiated By:

Child

Adult

Adult

Child

Adult

Adult

Directed By:

Child

Child

Child

Adult

Adult

Adult

Explicit Learning Goal:

NO

YES

YES

YES

YES

YES

35

Provocation Stations & Play Spectrum

Which are taller?

Graph the Results

Free Play

Guided Play

Games

Coopted Play

Playful Instruction

Direct Instruction

Initiated By:

Child

Adult

Adult

Child

Adult

Adult

Directed By:

Child

Child

Child

Adult

Adult

Adult

Explicit Learning Goal:

NO

YES

YES

YES

YES

YES

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Example: Math Standards

- Counting & Cardinality: Write numbers from 0-20. Represent a number of objects with a written numeral 0-20)
- Operations & Algebraic Thinking: Represent and solve problems involving addition and subtraction.
- Measurement & Data: Measure lengths indirectly and by iterating length units.

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Gesell at Yale
Program in Early Childhood

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Early Childhood Education
Community of Practice

LEARNING TO PLAY, PLAYING TO LEARN

With CCR Coach Amanda Gooch

Childcare Resources is hosting a Community of Practice exploring the foundations of play-based learning. Join Coach Amanda Gooch as she facilitates this special session designed for early childhood educators of Indian River County.

- ✚ Explore how play supports brain development and define play as a spectrum.
- ✚ Collaboratively plan ways to support play in early learning and understand its benefits for executive function.
- ✚ Develop an understanding of Communities of Practice (CoP) as a collaborative, job-embedded structure to enhance best practices and improve education quality.



- CEUs available from FLAEYC
- Certificate of in-service hours will be provided
- Light refreshments will be served
- Participation in this CoP requires prior registration for the PD Workshop

Meetings held at:
Childcare Resources
2300 5th Avenue, Suite 149
Vero Beach, FL 32960

Funding in part provided by
Indian River County Children's
Service Advisory Committee



Wednesday, December 3, 2025

6 PM - 7:30 PM

Wednesday, December 10, 2025

6 PM - 7:30 PM

Wednesday, December 17, 2025

6 PM - 7:30 PM

Learning Showcase

Tuesday, March 17, 2026

**Space is limited
Register Today!**



Please contact Coach Amanda Gooch with any questions: Amanda@ChildcareResourcesIR.org



Save the Date!

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP SERIES 2025-2026

**SATURDAY,
MARCH 14,
2026**

**I'll Bring the Joy: Finding Purpose, Passion,
and Peace in Early Childhood Education**

Featuring Nefertiti Poyner

9 AM to 12 PM | Vero Beach Museum of Art

*If you participate in all four workshops of the
Professional Development Workshop series, you will have
the opportunity to enter a drawing for a grand raffle prize!*

Thank you to our sponsors:
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Coaching for



Early Childhood Educators



Collaborate with an experienced educator | Amanda Gooch, Todd Morrow, Jensen McCord

A Childcare Resources Early Childhood Educator Coach is an empathetic, encouraging, and experienced educator who can help you with curriculum, instructional strategies, program structure, and more! First, you'll identify goals for your classroom or teaching style. Together, you and the coach will discuss strategies to help you reach those goals. After implementing the new strategies, you'll meet with the coach again for feedback.

Build. Work. Strengthen. Implement.

- Build on your strengths as a teacher or director
- Work toward achieving your classroom or school goals
- Strengthen relationships with staff and families
- Implement ideas and strategies from professional development workshops

Contact A Coach To Get Started!

Scan the QR code or
call 772-567-3202 ext. 114



Funding in part provided by
Indian River County
Children's Services
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**Early Educators:
Need help taking your next step?**

Childcare Resources

Higher Education Program

Stay on track with our mentorship program!

- Get one-on-one support with registration and financial aid.
- Meet with other local early educators in a supportive cohort.
- Participate in weekly study halls to help you succeed.
- Attend special program-exclusive events.



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Email Stephanie Harmody: Stephanie@ChildcareResourcesIR.org

Email Lisa Gonzalez: Lisa@ChildcareResourcesIR.org

New to teaching? Have years of experience?

Take the next step in your career by earning:

- Florida Child Care Professional Credential (FCCPC)
- Director's Credential
- A.S. in Early Childhood Education
- B.S. in Early Childhood Education
- M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction, *Concentration: Early Childhood Education Leadership*
- M.A with Early Childhood Emphasis - Early Childhood Policy Track
- M.A in Early Childhood Practitioner

Partner Schools Include:



Unsure about the financial cost of higher education?

The Higher Education Program can also help you navigate Florida's Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) program, helping to pay for your credential or degree, reducing or eliminating your cost.



Funding provided by
Indian River County Children's
Services Advisory Committee.



Childcare Resources of Indian River

Do you know a family struggling to pay the cost of childcare?

Childcare Resources offers affordable tuition assistance for families with children ages 6 weeks to 5 years who live in Indian River County, work or attend school full-time (30+ hours/week), and meet income requirements.

High-Quality Early Education

- Developmentally Appropriate Practice-based classrooms for students 6 weeks through 5 years
- All program sites are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

Family Wellness Resources

- Students are assessed twice annually to monitor progress toward developmental milestones
- On-site physical, occupational, and speech therapy services are available with a referral from the child's pediatrician
- Early childhood mental and behavioral health services are provided on-site

Family Support

- Parent engagement opportunities on early childhood education and development as well as other topics geared toward child and family success
- Case management services for resources and referrals



Courage - We are dedicated to elevating Early Childhood Education programs to benefit children and families in Indian River County.

Compassion - We treat all people with empathy and sensitivity, seeking a greater understanding of the challenges of the families we serve.

Resilience - We strive to instill hope and self-reliance in all stakeholders helping our students to thrive

Integrity - We have a unified belief that fairness, trust, and honesty are essential to sustaining successful relationships and to achieving results.

Relationships - We believe that fostering relationships are essential to empower our students and families to grow and flourish.

Scan To



Apply Today!

For more information, call
772-567-3202 or visit
ChildcareResourcesIR.org

Funding provided by:



Indian River County
Children's Services
Advisory Committee





Thank You for Attending!



Childcare Resources Mission:

To elevate and promote the highest quality early childhood development and education in Indian River County, focusing on economically challenged children and families.

