



Resource Article

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"Authentically Exploring
Children's Play"

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Is there a right, or wrong, way to play with toddlers? This question is up for debate in households across the country and even around the world. Opinions vary and some differences are generational while others are cultural. Some parents have 'read all the parenting books' and others simply delight with their child during play. It may be interesting to note, however, that researchers have found relationships between certain types of playful interactions and certain toddler behaviors.

In their 2013 article, 'Promoting Toddlers' Positive Social-Emotional Outcomes in Low-Income Families', Kochanska, Kim, Boldt, & Koenig Nordling published their study about the effectiveness of play-based intervention on children's cooperation with their mothers. For the purposes of this review we will focus solely on the types of play taught and the corresponding results.

Participants were recruited via flyers placed amongst community agencies (e.g., libraries, Women, Infants and Children offices, free medical clinics, etc.) in counties in Eastern Iowa. A total of 186 mothers and their toddlers

(25 to 36 months) participated in the study.

Participants were separated into two groups, a child-oriented intervention group, in which mothers were taught child-oriented play strategies, and a play-as-usual group, in which mothers were told to play/interact with their children in their typical way.

Both groups participated in a pretest, training session, home-play session, posttests, and kept play diaries. The mothers also completed the Life Experiences Survey (Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978), which provides a stress score based on the number of life stressors experienced to date, such as deaths, illness, financial problems, etc. The pre- and posttest sessions were portioned out to include play time, snack time, busy mother time (with mother completing questionnaires), a mother-child interaction time, and a free play time.

Training for the child-oriented play group included information from the "Child's Game" (McMahon & Forehand, 2003). Play techniques

Resource Article (continued)

were discussed, handouts provided and a video was observed demonstrating the techniques. Staff members modeled and practiced each of the techniques with each of the mothers. Mothers were asked about their understanding of the techniques and then given an opportunity to play with their child using them. Three strategies were emphasized (i.e., do's) and four strategies were de-emphasized (i.e., don'ts). The do's included: attend to what the child is doing, follow the child's lead, and provide positives/rewards. The don'ts shifted the focus away from the child and toward the mother, and included: asking questions, giving commands/suggestions, teaching, and critical negative, comments/discipline.

Staff asked parents in the child-oriented group to focus on the do's as much as possible and to avoid the don'ts as much as possible. Those in the play-as-usual group were provided a somewhat similar yet more general training experience; staff discussed preferred toys of children, play techniques were taught but not modeled, and the do's and don'ts were not included.

Over 10 weeks, mother-child dyads participated in 8 half-hour play sessions. Before each session staff reviewed the skills taught and answered questions. Those in the play-as-usual group were asked to play with their children using the techniques taught and to play as usual. The play sessions were video-taped and coded by observers blind to the experimental groups. After the sessions, staff provided feedback. The mothers in the child-oriented group, received feedback focused on the do's and don'ts while mothers in the play-as-usual group received feedback about the toys used.

Results revealed that children in both groups made significant gains with regard to maternal cooperation and socioemotional competence. However, children in the child-oriented group appeared more cooperative with their mothers for at least six months after posttest 2 than those children in the play-as-usual group. Interesting, yet probably not surprising, the mothers reporting more dosage of time played were typically married with fewer children, thereby potentially having more resources and fewer demands.

While our modern culture has trended away from the somewhat old fashioned notion, 'Children are to be seen and not heard', tuning into a child during play may not come naturally to all, especially those with limited resources and more demands. Yet, this study showed that teaching parents a variety of methods seemed to help foster their competence in play and, indirectly positive child outcomes. Effective play techniques and interaction strategies can be responsively taught to families in early intervention and through their playful interactions, children can develop positive relationships and parents can have fun too.

Kochanska, G., Kim, S., Boldt, L. J., & Koenig Nordling, J. (2013). Promoting Toddlers' Positive Social-Emotional Outcomes in Low-Income Families: a play-based experimental study. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology* 42(5), 700-712.

What do the data say?



Play helps young children gain pre-academic understanding. However, does the increasing emphasis on pre-academics overshadow the importance of play as the context for pre-academic understanding? Can pre-academic understanding happen in the absence of play?

Children learn through play. As children interact with others, explore objects, and experience activities they are learning about what people do, how things work, and how their actions influence the world around them. They are constructing their knowledge and making meaning of their world. As children develop they build upon their current knowledge, fitting their new ideas into what they already know (assimilation), and progressively adding new knowledge and reshaping their earlier knowledge (accommodation) (Piaget, 1964). For example, a baby explores objects by putting toys, and likely everything, in their mouth, then gradually as the baby learns more about the objects' properties he discovers some things are most enjoyable when shaken or rolled or pushed.

Child development theorist, Vygotsky (1976) described children's play as a facilitator of children's cognitive development. He described how children learn in social and cultural contexts and by receiving support and encouragement to learn within their zone of proximal development. Like Piaget, Vygotsky believed that new learning must occur within the child's readiness level. Think about it in terms of trying to learn nuclear physics without any prerequisite knowledge about radioactivity.

Back to children, in the absence of play, children can be "taught" abstract pre-academic concepts such as colors, numbers, shapes, letters, and words. Yet, when doing so outside of playful or meaningful contexts and without foundational experiences the pre-academic concepts being taught remain abstract for the child. In essence, the child becomes a passive recipient of information rather than the active constructor of knowledge by connecting and building upon prior knowledge (Ensar, 2014).

Considering the developmental progression of children's play, we see how their understanding is formed from real to abstract and how play, playful interactions, and participation in other meaningful day-to-day activities supports their learning. Very young children explore their world visually and gradually more interactively by using their hands, mouth, and the rest of their body. They learn about objects by mouthing, batting, picking up, dropping,

etc. They learn what things do and how they can be put together and taken apart, learning too that some things go or fit together and other things do not. Little by little, they learn the different purposes and functions of different objects. They relate objects to themselves and engage in early pretend, such as drinking from an empty cup, putting a phone to their ear. Gradually, they extend their play to others, pretending to feed mommy, and pretending to feed dolls or other representational objects. As young children engage in pretend play they begin to chain events such as feeding the doll, pretending to burp it, and then lying it down for a nap. Progressively, their play includes increased dramatization of familiar and less familiar events, such as pretending to be mommy, a firefighter, a teacher, etc. Overtime, young children use imaginary props in their play while also paying greater attention to and interest in the attributes of objects. For example, Dylan explores his toy box until he finds his two matching red cars, Jenney always wants to dress up in the yellow shoes, and Annette wants the long paper to write her pretend grocery list. As children's play becomes more sophisticated and complex they demonstrate higher levels of abstract thinking, including taking interest in and understanding pre-academic concepts.

While it is possible to teach a very young child to name the letter A, for example, starting sooner does not mean learning more or learning more quickly. Children's learning can be supported and scaffolded within their zone of proximal development, but it should not be rushed. Rather, it is more meaningful when the child looks at the stop sign and says stop versus looking at a flash card and being asked what letter/word it is.

As the push for earlier pre-academic learning continues, it is important to maintain a grounded understanding of how children learn and how best to support their foundational learning to encourage long lasting understanding and future success.

Ensar, F. (2014). How Children Construct Literacy: Piagetian Perspective. *International Journal of Secondary Education*, 2(2), 34-39.

Piaget, J. (1964). Part I: Cognitive development in children: Piaget development and learning. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 2(3), 176-186.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher mental processes*, eds. & trans. M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.



Consultation Corner

From February through July 2017 we are excited to have

Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak as our Consultation Corner expert. During this series Kristie will address a variety of questions that will help us *Authentically Explore Children's Play*.

What are effective ways to encourage children's play without suggesting everyone needs to sit on the floor and play with toys with their child?"

We have all heard the phrase, "play is the work of children." And while it is true, children should spend considerable time in play and learning through play....it is equally important that play be driven by children's curiosity and their interests. Lastly, play should be joyful and pleasurable.

Unfortunately, now days, most of us wouldn't define our work in these terms. Which in turn, means we need to be careful and make sure that children's play doesn't become effortful (i.e., work).

The great thing about play is it doesn't need to be formal, planned, or guided by parents! In fact, children learn a great deal when they are safe and engaged in solitary and non-directed play. But that doesn't mean adults don't play a critical role in helping children learn through play. It just means we don't have to constantly ask direct or correct children during play.

As a play partner with children, there are many roles providers can help families take on. Here are a few examples:

- Being the *"teacher"* by showing and modeling how to play with toys and materials
- Being the *"guide"* by shaping, expanding, and gently re-directing children's play as needed
- Being the *"commentator"* by describing and labeling children's play
- Being the *"teammate"* by playing alongside, supporting them when they struggle, and

being attentive to their interests

- Being the *"instigator"* by finding ways to spark children's curiosity about the world around them

We also don't need to use a limited idea of play... one where we're sitting together with no responsibilities or distractions, and can "just play." Instead, we can see every day natural learning opportunities as ways to engage children in play, and therefore in learning. And, in particular, we can support children's learning through their exploration of toys, materials, and objects found in their environment.

This means, whether we help parents and caregivers take on the role of guide, commentator, or instigator, we can embed learning and build children's play skills during daily activities and interactions. The following matrix provides an example of how this can be accomplished.

Building Play Skills During Every Day Natural Learning Opportunities

In the matrix, the top row includes the developmental progression of play skills related to use of objects (toys and materials). For example, the first play skill depicts how as children begin to explore the world around them, they use their senses (looking, mouthing), and then move to acting upon toys and materials in simple ways (e.g., patting, banging). Next up in terms how children play with objects is in the way they were designed to be used (i.e., in a functional way), and then eventually to where they are able to use one object to represent another.

Consultation Corner (continued)

In the left hand column is a sample list of daily activities (e.g., meals, playtime) that can become the context for playing and learning.

Lastly, in each of box/cell where the daily activity and play skill “meets” is an example of what an adult or older sibling can do or say to create the opportunity for learning together through play.

Play Skills Daily Activities	Moving from sensory exploration of objects to making simple motor on actions	Moving from simple motor actions to functional use of objects	Moving from functional use of objects to representational use of objects
Diaper Changing/ Toileting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide rattles to <i>shake</i>, things to <i>squeeze</i>, jars with lids to <i>take on</i> and <i>off</i>, objects to <i>bat</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model using a wipe to clean hands or other body parts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about what’s happening. “Oh! This is a magic wand. Poof your teeth are clean.”
Meals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide food in boxes/containers that can be <i>dumped</i> (e.g., crackers, cereal, fruit snacks) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide cups to drink out of, napkins to wipe with, instruments to eat/scoop with/cut with 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model using a napkin for a table cloth, a cup for a bowl, and a fork for teeth
Transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model <i>shaking</i> keys, and <i>putting</i> things in bags getting ready to go 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about what’s happening, “I’m going to use my keys to lock to the door.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model using your smart phone as a mirror to check your hair, using an umbrella as a walking stick, using packages of snack as money for the toll/subway/bus fare
Solitary/ Supervised Playtime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about what you see the child doing, “I see you _____ (<i>dumping, tossing, shaking, throwing, pushing, pulling, banging</i>) the _____.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about what you see the child doing, “You’re turning the pages of the book.”, “You’re stacking the blocks.”, “You’re brushing the baby’s hair.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about what you see the child doing, “I see you using _____ for _____. That’s very creative!”

Now you give it a try... pick another common daily activity (e.g., bed time, getting dressed, reading a story) and see if you can think of opportunities to build a child’s play skills by modeling, describing, and providing interesting toys and materials.



On the WWW

Helping parents understand the importance of play and the research behind it can be a common conversation in early intervention. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has multiple resources that providers can share with families when the topic of play comes up.

Champlain College's graduate program in early childhood education. The resource is a list of 10 points "Every Parent Should Know about Play." Sharing one or more of these points can lead to a rich discussion and identification of different ways to encourage a child's play and playful interactions.

The following link includes a brief resource by Laurel Bongiorno, PhD, director of

<http://families.naeyc.org/learning-and-development/child-development/10-things-every-parent-should-know-about-play>



Continuing Education for KIT Readers

The Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) is offering a continuing education opportunity for KIT readers.

Upon successful completion of the exam, you will receive a certificate of non-discipline specific continuing education contact hours.

In line with the focus on *Authentically Exploring Children's Play*, readers are invited to receive continuing education contact hours for reading the monthly KIT publications (February through June 2017) and completing a multiple-choice exam about the content covered in these KITs.

KIT readers will receive the exam in July 2017. There is no need to register for the CEUs. Rather, if you are interested complete the exam online at www.edis.army.mil

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Thank you for your continued interest in the KIT.

