POSITION STATEMENT:
THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY TO CHILDREN’S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS
“Playing to Learn/Learning to Play”

When we treat children’s play as seriously as it deserves, we are helping them feel the joy that’s to be found in the creative spirit…It's the things we play with and the people who help us play that make a great difference in our lives.

-- Fred Rogers

Introduction

Purposeful play is of primary importance in supporting the development and learning of children. Sadly, many children do not have the opportunity for imaginative play, either in the home or in some early childhood environments. Their home lives may be overscheduled with structured activities or filled with large portions of their time engaged in passive activities such as watching television or videos. They therefore lack the foundational skills that are linked to play: memory, emotional self-regulation, oral language and literacy, perspective-taking, and social competence. In order to succeed in elementary school and beyond, children need to develop the capacity for mature and complex play. Purposeful play is complemented by teacher-facilitated activities. These may include what Vygotsky refers to as scaffolding learning individually or in small groups by providing what Klein, Wirth, and Linas describe as “a bridge from children’s current to their future language, cognitive, social, and emotional processes.” Teachers establish and guide the play environment, which in turn stimulates children’s innate desire to construct their own knowledge. As Carrie Lobman states, “…early childhood classrooms are not purely child centered or adult directed, but are an ongoing collaboration.” Classrooms that include purposeful play facilitate collaborations among young children and between children and their teachers. Strong emotional connections are created and sustained through these important collaborations that support children’s self esteem and social development, enabling them to succeed throughout their educational experience.

The introduction of standards into the early childhood setting has posed new challenges for educators who work with young children. Standards provide a basis for the content of early childhood curriculum, including kindergarten and first grade, and the desired outcomes for children. The classroom practices and teaching strategies used to implement standards, however, are of equal if not greater importance. In a joint position statement, 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) state that early learning standards must “emphasize significant developmentally appropriate content and outcomes” and “use implementation and assessment strategies that are ethical and appropriate for young children.” For early learning standards to be effective, they must be implemented through “equally effective curriculum, classroom practices, and teaching strategies that connect with young children’s interests and abilities.”
Philosophical beliefs that support learning through purposeful play include the following:

Philosophers and educators have researched the importance of play in a child’s intellectual, social, emotional and physical development. This statement pulls from the theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, Malaguzzi (Reggio Emilia), and Montessori, which regard the value of play as a vehicle of learning for children. During a child’s day there will be structured and unstructured periods, enabling children to construct knowledge through various methods at their own rate. Beliefs that support learning through play include:

- Children are viewed as thinkers with emerging theories about the world as they develop reflective thinking.
- The emphasis of purposeful play is on children learning through the process of their efforts, not the product of it.
- Children’s construction of knowledge is a continuous process along the path of ever increasing knowledge.
- Children develop internal motivation through choice and practicing individual decision-making.
- Children develop a more complex hierarchical system of short and long-term goals.

Elements of purposeful play:

- Exploring open-ended activities leading to an increased understanding of and knowledge about the world.
- Learning new concepts and building skills at a pace that fits each child’s unique developmental level.
- Making choices that are directed by and meaningful to the child.
- Providing opportunities for children to practice language, literacy, reasoning, numeracy, social, and physical skills.
- Creating the foundation for building positive relationships with other children and adults.
- Developing each child’s personality and sense of self.
- Inspiring creativity, stimulating the imagination, and developing abstract thinking.
- Presenting opportunities for meaningful problem solving.
- Practicing negotiation and risk-taking.
- Learning about cultural norms and expectations, as well as rules and consequences.

In a play-based classroom, the child:

- Learns through open-ended, hands-on experiences and interactions with other children and adults.
- Constructs knowledge with his/her own understanding.
- Compares his/her own thinking to that of others.
- Creates personal meaning.
- Observes.
- Explores materials.
• Collects information.
• Examines.
• Investigates.
• Creates hypotheses.
• Acquires interests.
• Makes and applies his/her own rules.
• Adjusts to conventional rule systems.
• Demonstrates learning in various ways.
• Moves freely from one interest area to another.
• Makes choices and decisions.
• Experiences outdoor and gross motor play.
• Engages in imaginative play, alone and with groups of children.

*In a play-based classroom, the teacher:*

• Behaves in an interactive manner, mediating the environment for the children.
• Seeks the children’s point of view in order to understand their present conceptions for use in subsequent experiences.
• Focuses on the larger concept before moving to specific details.
• Assesses the children’s learning through observation, work samples, and portfolios.
• Plans, resources, and maintains an enriching and challenging environment that facilitates each child’s optimal development.
• Plans learning through play activities.
• Extends and supports children’s spontaneous play.
• Extends and develops children’s language and communication through play.
• Responds to children’s interests or shared experiences.
• Respects each child’s unique learning style and individuality.
• Asks open-ended questions such as, “What else could you do?”
• Allows time for sustained inquiry.
• Nurtures social skills to develop a community of learners.

*Learning environments that support purposeful play are characterized by:*

• An organizational system in which materials can be safely accessed and easily put away.
• Materials and time for dramatic, imaginative play.
• Ample and rich language and print.
• Manipulative and table toys.
• Art materials and tools to explore.
• Writing tools and materials.
• Science and math materials to foster experimentation and exploration.
• Sensory play materials, including sand and water.
• A library area.
• Space and equipment for music and movement activities.
• Cooking experiences.
• Computer exploration.
• Blocks of various sizes and materials.
• Outdoor and gross motor play.
• Defined areas with the flexibility to move materials when there is a purpose for doing so.
• A quiet area for the child who needs to be alone.

Elizabeth Jones states that, “facts acquired in isolation become easily forgotten trivia.” As early childhood educators, our goal should be to enable children to think creatively so they may succeed in a complex and ever-changing world. Purposeful play is an important and developmentally appropriate way to achieve this goal and should be a primary element of any early childhood program.

ADDENDUM

History of Play Statement

In February of 2003, the Evanston Early Childhood Directors’ Council (EECC) voted to endorse the Evanston Early Learning Standards. These standards for local early childhood programs were developed over the course of five years by a group representing community early childhood programs; Evanston/Skokie District 65 administrators, teachers, and parents; programs holding Pre-Kindergarten subcontracts from the school district; and local organizations serving young children. They were designed to correlate with the Illinois Early Learning Standards and the District 65 K-12 Community Standards. The Evanston Community Collaboration had endorsed the Standards on January 24, 2003. In March of 2003, the District 65 Board of Education also endorsed the Standards. Voting to adopt the Evanston Early Learning Standards reflected the beliefs of members of the EECC that standards can be an important vehicle to influence early childhood curriculum and consequently to have a positive effect on learning outcomes for children in programs where standards are used.

After the Evanston Community Collaboration and EECC had endorsed the Evanston Early Learning Standards, some of the EECC program directors were concerned that without a document supporting the importance of implementing these standards in a developmentally appropriate manner and without teacher training, the standards might be misinterpreted as desired outcomes to be achieved through any means. Marsha Ettema (Reba Early Learning Center), Laurie Levy (Cherry Preschool), Susan Ruhl (Total Child Center), and Judy Ward (Unity Nursery School) drafted a play statement that was presented to the EECC and the Standards Committee. After receiving feedback from both groups, some members of the Standards Committee, Nancy Bruski (early childhood consultant), Helen Roberts-Evans (Child Care Center), and Barbara Walle (Oakton School kindergarten teacher), joined the writing committee. The Play Statement is the result of this collaborative process. The EECC and the Standards Committee endorsed the Play Statement in January 2004. Both groups recommended that it be included as a companion piece to the Evanston Early Learning Standards.
Bibliography


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