



Play: The Science Behind Its Importance to Literacy Development

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2010 ED Reading Institute
Anaheim, CA

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Key Topics for Today

- Play—Critically Important Yet Disappearing
- What is Play
- How Play Relates to Literacy Development
- Facilitating Play with Intentionality

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Play is Disappearing: at Home

- Fewer children in households and neighborhoods
- More lessons and play dates, less free time
- Safety of playgrounds and neighborhoods
- Children less likely to be around older children who can be play mentors

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Play is Disappearing: in Toys

- More realistic
- Linked to Products
- Increased use of computers and video games
- Less need for imagination
- More narrowly focused than open-ended

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Play is Disappearing: at School

- Emphasis on direct instruction
 - Especially in reading and math
- Pressure to cover more topics
- Pressure to meet standards/adequate yearly progress
- Less recess

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Yet Play is Critically Important

- Cognitive development
- Social development
- Physical development
- Self-regulation

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Characteristics of Play

- Children enjoy play
- Flexibility in purpose
- Children seek out opportunities to play
- Non-realistic aspect

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Play:

- Has social, emotional, physical, and cognitive components
- Allows humans – and all animals – to learn about, try out, and practice the rules and desired skills within their community
- Helps children create abstract concepts not tied to their concrete referents
- Reflects the player's culture and experiences

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Types of Play

- Manipulative/functional play
- Constructive play
- Symbolic (dramatic) play
- Games with rules

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Manipulative/Physical Play

- Playing with objects and using body
- Especially important for infants and toddlers
- (But also for older children and adults)
- Learning about how things work and what they can do
- Repetition and practice
- Trial and error

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Constructive Play

- Begins as functional play
- Becomes more symbolic as children use objects to create new ones
- Over-reliance on highly realistic toys/props may limit creativity and growth of symbolic play

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Symbolic (Dramatic) Play

- Using one thing to mean something else
- Simple (block as teacup)
- More complex (role playing)
- Especially important in preschool years
- Social components = socio-dramatic play
- More mature forms promote self-regulation

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Socio-dramatic play

- Imaginary situation
- Assigned roles with implicit rules of behavior
- Language involved (social interaction)
- Less mature play is
 - More limited in behavior
 - More repetitive
 - Less imaginative and engaging
- Only mature play contributes to self-regulation

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Games with Rules

- Sports, checkers, etc.
- Established structure must be followed
- Especially important in primary grades
- Less opportunity for negotiation/discussion
- Focus too early can inhibit development of social competence and self-regulation

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Predictors of Literacy Development

National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) findings:

- Alphabet knowledge
- Phonological awareness
- Rapid automatic naming (RAN) of letters or digits
- RAN of objects or colors
- Writing or writing name
- Phonological memory

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Additional Predictors

- Concepts about print
- Print knowledge
- Reading readiness
- Oral language
- Visual processing

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***Play, not just direct instruction,
can help children gain these
skills and knowledge***

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Play is motivating

- All humans—all animals—are motivated to play
- Through play, we explore things, practice skills, and consolidate knowledge
- Enriched experiences and environments allow for wider opportunities for play and growth

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Play provides teachers:

- **Insight through observation**
 - What children already know
 - Their interests
- **Opportunity**
 - To build bridges to what children know and can do
 - Offer new experiences, especially related to literacy
 - Provide enriched language

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Immature vs. Mature Play

Immature	Mature
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Imitation<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Super-hero• Baby/mommy• Monsters• Limited possible actions• Repetitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Roles with rules• Extends possibilities• Grows in complexity

Mature socio-dramatic play promotes self-regulation

- When children are motivated to stick with the roles and rules of play
- They grow in their ability to:
 - inhibit impulses
 - act in coordination with others
 - make plans

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Self-regulation

- Ability to focus
- Inhibit impulsive behavior
- Control emotions
- Critical for social competence and school success

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Teachers play a critical role by intentionally supporting and extending children's play

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Teachers set the stage for play

- Building on children's knowledge and experiences
- Using themes or projects
- Providing time, space and materials to enhance play

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Teachers help children engage

- Keep children as primary architects of play
- Help children reach full potential as players

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Teachers scaffold children's play

- Model
- Demonstrate
- Guide
- Elaborate and extend language, especially if stuck in immature play

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But, are not too intrusive

- Mentor and coach role
- Limited co-player
- If too instructive, no longer play

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Specific strategies for literacy

- Incorporate tools for literacy in play settings
- Encourage planning and writing about play experiences
- Expand and extend vocabulary and concepts

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Suggested Resources

- www.naeyc.org/dap
- www.toolsofthemind.org
- *Mind in the Making*, Galinsky
- *Children's Play: The Root of Reading*, Zigler, et al. (Eds.)
- *Learning to Read and Write: DAP for Young Children*, Neuman, et al.

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