

Using the ECIPs in Play



Introduction

Children are active learners. When they interact with people and with objects, they're building their knowledge of the world. In play, they explore and investigate, experimenting with how things work. As they construct, create, pretend, and problem-solve in play, they are learning and re-learning concepts and principles that give them foundational understandings for later academic learning.

Play is essential to children's development and is well-supported in recommendations for best practices in early care and education. Research studies and position statements from many professional organizations cite the connection between children's engagement in productive play and cognitive learning, academic achievement, physical health, social-emotional development and the development of approaches to learning (Rendon and Gronlund 2017).

Unfortunately, in recent years the emphasis on children's play has been lessened. In a time when children have much higher involvement with media, more sedentary lifestyles, and less recess in schools, children don't have as many opportunities to engage in physical play, in pretend play, or in exploratory play at home or at school. Some educators including in early childhood programs favor addressing high standards and improving outcomes only by using curricular approaches that emphasize more didactic, teacher-led, passive learning experiences. This either/or approach is not recommended nor beneficial for children's long-term educational achievement.

“Rather than detracting from academic learning, play appears to support the abilities that underlie such learning and thus to promote school success.” (Copple and Bredekamp 2009, 15).

The Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs): Minnesota's Early Learning Standards support play, exploration, and active learning for children from birth through kindergarten entry. They are designed so that teachers and providers can intentionally embed them into children's play experiences both indoors and outside and then observe children's play related to the ECIPs. The standards are not meant to lessen play opportunities for children in any way. Rather, using the best practices of child-directed, playful learning and creative exploration, combined with well-designed environments and some direct teaching, will develop young learners fully prepared for a successful school experience.

The Qualities of Play at Different Ages

There are similarities and differences among play experiences at different ages. In the time from birth to kindergarten entry, children grow and change dramatically and so do their play capabilities. However, there are some constants in play that can be seen across this age span:

1. Curiosity is a driver for exploration.
2. The most engaging play experiences are child-directed or child-determined (Adults may support and enhance).
3. The most engaging play materials are open-ended with many possibilities to be tried.
4. The child's interests are prime motivators for continued engagement.
5. Adults and other children can have important roles in facilitating and scaffolding children's play.

Let's consider differences among play experiences at different ages.

Infants and Toddlers

For infants and toddlers, play and exploration are rooted in strong attachments to family members as well as teachers and providers. The young, non-mobile infant observes and explores the adults who care for him, touching, listening, looking, and taking in all that is around him. He also explores his own body, figuring out what he can do with his hands, his arms, his torso, and his toes. As older infants begin to crawl and walk, they interact more with the physical environment and explore their surroundings, still needing the base of support provided by familiar and trusted adults. Toddlers are even more active as they play and explore with a greater range of motion and physical capabilities. Their increasing communication skills and growing independence allow them to be more adventurous but always with from solid base of adult support.

Effective teachers and providers structure the environment with safety in mind and offer intriguing

objects appropriate for the age group. They interact with children as they play and explore, giving descriptions that increase vocabulary, engaging in longer conversations as children's language usage increases, and encouraging curiosity and problem solving.

Preschoolers

For preschoolers, play and exploration are the most meaningful ways to acquire skills and knowledge as well as to practice skills and refine understanding of new concepts. Preschoolers engage in solitary play or play alongside others. As they move toward the later preschool years, they begin to interact and cooperate in play, learning ways to share ideas, to appreciate group contributions and the greater creativity that results. Preschoolers learn vocabulary, concepts, and principles as they follow their curiosity and experiment and hypothesize. They love to pretend and incorporate many of their developing skills as they imitate adults in dramatic play (such as in scribbling a grocery list or setting a table for a pretend family of four). Play provides strong motivation for learning, which builds attention span and engagement, willingness to stay with a challenge, and engage in conflict resolution to keep the play going.

Effective teachers and providers of preschoolers organize the environment so that it offers children delineated areas in which they can work with different materials and engage in different play experiences. Areas with wooden blocks are large and expansive so that constructions can be built freely and cooperatively. Dramatic play areas are well-stocked with materials to reflect children's family lives, but are also regularly changed to encourage children to explore other aspects of adult lives. Toys and materials are provided to encourage use of fine motor skills and creativity. Books and writing materials are offered for exploration and to encourage enjoyment of reading and beginning steps in writing and communicating with others. Science and mathematics materials are provided to build on children's interests and develop their understanding related to scientific principles and mathematical concepts.

Teachers' and Providers' Roles in Play

Teachers and providers plan for play experiences with learning in mind. Using the indicators in the ECIPs to plan, they individualize play activities and carefully choose materials, offering ideas and asking questions of children. They connect play and learning in ways that are just right for young children.

“Playful learning is a whole-child approach to education that includes both free play and guided play...guided play offers a new twist. It refers to play in a structured environment around a general curricular goal that is designed to stimulate children’s natural curiosity, exploration, and play with learning-oriented materials... In guided play, learning remains child-directed. This is a key point. Children learn targeted information through exploration of a well-designed and structured environment ...and through the support of adults who ask open-ended questions to gently guide the child’s exploration.” (Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff 2014)

When using the ECIPs to plan the environment, it is important to remember the skills described in the Social and Emotional domain as well as in the Approaches to Learning domain. How teachers and providers structure the environment, offer materials and talk with children can directly support the development of these skills.

The continuum format of the ECIPs makes it easy for teachers and providers to see what the next indicators are by age. This helps teacher or providers know exactly what kind of support s/he will need to provide to the child to support continued growth. In some instances it is important to look back at the indicators in a younger age span, to reflect on and plan for experiences that children may have missed.

While child-direction is an important aspect of meaningful play for children, adults have important roles in bringing about and supporting play, as well as occasionally providing teacher-directed activities and information. Effective teachers and providers sustain children’s engagement rather than interrupt it. They strive to enhance the learning opportunities, to build upon and extend children’s interests, natural

curiosity, and engagement. They artfully step in and out of children’s play, honoring the child’s lead, evaluating the success of the experience, and being ready to challenge children to try something new and to apply their abilities to the fullest. Most of all, effective teachers and providers know that play, and all learning experiences, should be joyful and fun for young children.

“Children love to find out more about their world, seek and master new challenges, and gain in competence (Hyson 2008). Teachers are always more effective when they tap into this natural love of learning rather than dividing work and enjoyment. As some early childhood educators like to put it, children love nothing better than ‘hard fun.’” (Copple and Bredekamp 2009, 50)

Conclusion

Play is the best vehicle for learning in the early years. The ECIPs support teachers and providers in using play in their curricular approaches for children from birth to kindergarten entry. The ECIPs can be incorporated into all play experiences and provide information to teachers and providers that help them make play meaningful, purposeful, and filled with learning possibilities.

References:

- Copple, Carol, and Sue Bredekamp, eds. 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*. 3rd ed. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Rendon, Thomas and Gaye Gronlund. 2017. *Saving Play: Addressing Standards through Play-Based Learning in Preschool and Kindergarten*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.