

Play-Based Learning at Right To Play

A Guide to Using Play for
Learning and Well-Being



RIGHT TO PLAY

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Before our teacher learned to play with us in class, it was very boring. We would fall asleep because the subjects were hard to understand. Then we started playing, and learning became easier.

– Aisha, 13, Ghana

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Introduction

Right To Play uses a variety of approaches to play to support children's learning, development, and well-being, including sports, music, theatre, art, and play-based learning.

This document focuses on our play-based learning methodology and approach, and how it can be used for learning and development goals related to Right To Play's core programmatic areas: early childhood care and education, primary education, gender equality and girls' well-being, and psychosocial support.

Note: In this document, the term 'children' refers to individuals aged three to 19.

This document contains the following key resources:

- ☘ *Standard organizational definitions of play and play-based learning*
- ☘ *A description of the play-based learning framework used by Right To Play*
- ☘ *Tips and tools to implement play-based learning*



What Is Play?

Play is important for children’s learning and development; it is a familiar and engaging activity for children, youth, and adults (Göncü et al., 2000; Holmes, 2011; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Play experiences around the world are similar in many ways, sharing many and sometimes all of the same characteristics (Eberle, 2014; Smith & Vollstedt, 1985).

What Is Play?

*Play is a universal experience; across cultures, people engage in some form of play. Play is a **fun and enjoyable** activity that has many characteristics, like being **actively engaging, meaningful, and** encouraging players to **practice their agency and use their imagination**.*

The Characteristics of Play



Fun and enjoyable

Play allows people to experience enjoyment from an activity or task.



Socially interactive

Play creates opportunities for people to communicate thoughts, feelings, and ideas and build healthy relationships.



Actively engaging

When playing, people become more deeply engaged in an activity or task, which helps them stay focused.



Meaningful

Playful environments and experiences help people make connections between new learning and existing knowledge and experiences in their lives, making learning relevant and emotionally stimulating.



Imaginative

When people play, they use their imaginations, creativity, and take risks that encourage them to explore their curiosities and learn about the world around them.

Why Is Play Important?

Play is a universal right for children, as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31). Engaging in play that includes some or all of the features listed previously can significantly influence children's learning and development, including their physical health and socio-emotional well-being. Play can support inclusion and promote equality for all, including girls and children with disabilities. Here are some of the ways play is important for children:



Photo Credit: Heran Films

Play Supports Psychosocial Well-Being

🌟 **Play supports and strengthens children's socio-emotional learning.** Play allows children to be at the centre of their own development. It's where they take the lead, express themselves, use their imagination, and learn about others in a comfortable and positive environment (Keung & Cheung, 2019). Through play, children and youth develop and practice important holistic skills that prepare them for healthy development and adulthood, like resilience, stress management, and self-regulation (McClelland et al., 2015; Pyle et al., 2022; Sullivan, 2006; Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2012).

🌟 **Children build secure attachments with important people in their lives through play.** Play supports children to form healthy relationships with the adults who are closest to them, like parents and teachers (Ginsburg et al., 2007). These healthy relationships can support critical social and

emotional skills, such as teamwork, problem-solving, and communication (Ainsworth, 1989).

Play Is Inclusive

🌟 **Play is fundamental to the human experience.** Scientific evidence shows that play is essential to the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development of children and youth (Bergen, 2002; Reverdito et al., 2017; Scheu & Xu, 2014; Whitebread et al., 2012). Everyone plays, no matter their age. But what play looks like or feels like may differ. While also enjoyed by older children, youth, and even adults, free play that includes pretending and acting out stories, creating, or building tends to be something very young children engage in most often. As they get older, children's play tends to look like games with rules, creative forms of playing (e.g. painting), and organized sports. Even adults engage in different ways of playing that benefit them as they move throughout their lives (Whitton, 2022). For example,

puzzles, colouring, or even a playful demeanor can help adults cope with or reduce feelings of stress (Clifford et al., 2024).

☘ All children can grow and learn through play. It is essential to ensure that girls and children experiencing vulnerability, particularly children with disabilities, are not only included but actively encouraged to participate in and lead play in different ways. Play environments that are inclusive welcome children of all genders, backgrounds, and abilities and ensure that each child feels valued and included (Danniels & Pyle, 2023; Vasileva, 2018). Children learn to respect and appreciate diversity, fostering a culture of inclusion.

☘ Play helps facilitate conversations and learning about complex experiences. Play can bring children and youth to the table in collaboration with peers and adults. It can create an environment where they feel safe to express themselves, share their experiences, advocate for their rights, ask tough questions, internalize information into their lived experiences, and overcome trauma or mistreatment, while also contributing to their leadership and agency (Gavin et al., 2010; Kinoshita & Woolley, 2015; Lansdown, 2020).



Photo Credit: Julius Mahela



Photo Credit: Paul Bettings

Learning Happens through Play

☘ Play is brain-building. Play that responds to children's needs and meets them at their skill level enhances their neurocognitive development. With play, children, especially those aged three to six years, develop executive functions, self-regulation, and language skills that help them interact with others and the world around them with ease (Ginsburg, 2007; Lockhart, 2010).

☘ Children develop and practice using their agency. It's important for children to experience agency – a feeling that they can affect or change a situation – so that they can grow up to become capable and confident decisionmakers in adulthood. For children, agency means being able to express their own perspectives, opinions, and ideas and take action in whatever way they choose (Sirkko, 2019). Children practice agency when they can make decisions and have autonomy over their play (Canning, 2007; Matthews & Rix, 2013). This is especially important for girls. Societal pressures and

stereotypes often limit girls' sense of agency and confidence. But by encouraging agency, play can empower girls to assert themselves, make choices, and take risks within a safe and supportive environment.

Play fosters important skills in early childhood. At this critical stage in their development, very young children begin to understand social roles and rules, expand on their oral language development, develop mental representations of the world, and engage in other more complex and critical thinking skills that support academic learning later in life. Playful environments provide a developmentally appropriate context for children to understand the world around them and practice these different skills (Pyle et al., 2017).

Play leads to academic engagement and success. Play improves learning in many areas, including literacy and numeracy. Studies have shown that children who learn through play earn higher grades than children in more direct instruction-based classrooms (Alfieri et al., 2011; Alle-Herndon et al., 2022; Parker & Thomsen, 2019).

See How Learning Naturally Happens Through Play

Siblings Khadija and Fatima want to build the tallest tower they can in the grassy area outside their home. They collect stones, sticks, and branches to build their tower. Supplies in hand, the siblings work together and problem solve to determine how to create a structure that is both tall and stable. They try different strategies and sometimes disagree. But in the end, after seeing things from each other's perspective, they compromise on an approach and successfully complete construction on their tower.

Photo Credit: Julius Mahela



Explore other Right To Play resources on Play-Based learning:

[Examining the Evidence Base for Play and Psychosocial Well-Being in Crisis Contexts: A Literature and Right To Play Document Review](#)

[Promoting Psychosocial Well-Being Through the Power of Play](#)

[Global Strategic Plan](#)

Play as Pedagogy: How Can Play Be Used as a Tool for Learning and Development?

Learning is a natural benefit of play. At Right To Play, we provide children with the opportunity to play because of this natural benefit. But we also play with purpose and intentionally harness play to teach children important skills for their learning and development. Using play in this way is called play-based learning, and the purposeful inclusion of a learning goal in play-based learning is what differentiates it from play.

Play-based learning can be considered a pedagogy or a teaching practice. Pedagogy encompasses how learning happens and is an interactive process of teaching and learning between children and adults (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, cited in Wall et al., 2015).

Play-based learning is often described as learning while playing (Danniels & Pyle, 2018). The approach considers developmental appropriateness, child-centredness, and adult participation to encourage and extend learning (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2013; Wood, 2014). Play as a tool for learning and development offers many benefits, including improving numeracy (Bergen, 2009) and literacy skills, such as reading, writing, and language (Pyle et al., 2018; Roskos & Christie, 2011).

Environments where play-based learning is prioritized can support deeper learning experiences and the achievement of learning objectives. For example, in environments that support play-based mathematics learning, children can actively explore, test theories, and use constructive materials to visually represent concepts, such as using blocks for counting and geometry (Sarama & Clements, 2009). When it comes to building literacy skills through play, many point to the importance of print-rich play environments (Vukelich, 1994). On top of literacy and numeracy skills building, studies have shown how play and play-based learning support

cognitive, socio-emotional, and self-regulation development (Bergen, 2002; Bodrova & Leong, 2008; Carson & White, 2013; Yogman et al., 2018).

Adult Engagement in Learning: A Continuum

As a pedagogy, or teaching practice, play-based learning offers the benefit of being a developmentally appropriate and child-centred approach to teaching and learning, which considers the role of both children and adults in creating engaging and meaningful learning environments and experiences. Many researchers and those who use play in their practice understand how play is used to meet learning goals by using a continuum.

What Is Play-Based Learning?

Play-based learning is learning through different types of play that are selected for a purpose or learning goal. Play-based learning has the same fundamental characteristics of play, but it is different from play because it is intentionally selected for a purpose or learning goal. By using play and playful environments that match children's level of development, play-based learning helps children make sense of their learning and the world around them.

Right To Play's Approach to Play-Based Learning



A continuum of play-based learning shows the range of play types that can make up play-based learning, as well as the extent to which children and adults direct learning and interact with each other in a playful context, from adult-directed to child-directed play. The continuum has guided how play is used in humanitarian contexts and programs, including Right To Play's strategic shift toward a broader approach to play that can be used for learning.

Right To Play's approach to play is a simplified version of Pyle & Danniels' (2017) framework on play-based learning, which focuses on how adults and children take the lead and use their agency to engage in play and learning. Pyle and Danniels' (2017) Continuum of Play-Based Learning shows types of play that vary in terms of the level of control adults and children have. On one end of the continuum are games and structured activities that are typically adult led. Collaborative play, where control is shared between adults and children, is in the middle. On the opposite end is free play, which is child-directed. A key feature of effective play-based learning is the presence of collaborative play (also called guided play), which highlights a need for both adults and children to be involved in play. Guided play is often characterized by adults incorporating learning goals

into play while making sure children maintain some control over how they engage in play (Weisberg et al., 2013). In this way, guided play helps to create a developmentally appropriate context for children's learning and development.

Explore more resources on play-based learning:

[*Play Facilitation: The Science Behind the Art of Engaging Young Children \(LEGO Foundation\)*](#)

[*Learning Through Play \(UNICEF\)*](#)

[*Play Learning Lab \(University of Toronto\)*](#)

[*Save The Children and Play: Guidance Note*](#)

[*Play in Education, Development & Learning \(PEDAL\) \(University of Cambridge\)*](#)

[*British Columbia Play Today Handbook*](#)

[*Play Scotland*](#)

[*Project Zero \(Harvard Graduate School of Education\)*](#)

Different Types of Play in Play-Based Learning

Right To Play's approach to play-based learning is used in formal education settings, which include classrooms and outdoor spaces, like playgrounds, as well as non-formal education settings, such as after-school clubs and community events. Play-based learning at Right To Play is used to achieve a variety of learning and development goals, including academic learning in subjects, such as language and mathematics, and socio-emotional skills, like relationship-building and recognizing and expressing emotions. It is also used to promote equality and inclusion of girls and children with

disabilities, as well as specific programming like sexual and reproductive health rights education. Because play-based learning is about how adults and children engage in learning, with appropriate considerations for interests, learning environments, developmental needs, and safety, it can be used in a variety of programs, contexts, and age groups.

Our approach to play-based learning includes the three types of play: adult-directed, collaborative (guided), and child-directed.

Adult-Directed Play-Based Learning



Adult-Directed Play

- ✓ Rules-based/structured
- ✓ Adult sets learning goal
- ✓ Children follow instructions

Right To Play has a rich history in using games to support learning and development. Adult-directed play-based learning often takes the form of games and other structured activities with rules. This means that in order to be successful in the activity, children must follow the instructions or rules. The rules are often set by the person facilitating the activity, for example, a teacher, a Right To Play-trained coach, a Junior Leader or peer, a Girls' Club facilitator, or a parent. In adult-directed play, everyone is typically engaged in the same activity. In this type of play-based learning, children do not often use their agency to make decisions or changes to the play; they simply follow instructions. Because of its structured nature, adult-directed play may not necessarily be the right type of play-based learning to use when it comes to exploring experiences and concepts in open-ended ways. This type of play-based learning does not necessarily limit children's creativity and critical thinking; it only means that children will be asked to explore their creativity and

employ skills in more specific ways for purposes that are selected by an adult. Still, there are many benefits to using adult-directed play.

Adult-directed play creates opportunities for adults to:

- ☛ Enter into play-based learning, especially if they are more comfortable with traditional, direct teaching methods. This type of play allows adults to maintain a large portion of control over the learning experience.
- ☛ Add structure to a play experience to align more strictly to learning goals and teach specific academic skills (e.g. a game that teaches counting or a letter-sound matching activity).
- ☛ Use play to collect information and assess specific skills in a controlled way for many or all children in a classroom or group setting.

Adult-Directed Play-Based Learning in Action

Lina works at a summer camp for children affected by displacement. Every afternoon, her group goes outside for games. Today, Lina's group will play a game called Throwing Negativity to develop skills for managing emotions. Lina gathered her equipment ahead of time and marked the play area into two zones. When the children join her outside, she divides them into teams and sends each team to their zone. Lina explains how to play, telling the children that she will call out to them to pause during the game so she can count the score.



Collaborative/Guided Play-Based Learning



Collaborative/Guided Play

- ✓ Co-created play experiences
- ✓ Learning is planned and implemented around children's interests
- ✓ Children and adults direct play
- ✓ Adults guide learning in context of play

A note on power dynamics and collaborative play: Decision-making power is also shared between children when they play in groups. It is important to reflect on how children share control with each other. Girls and children with disabilities or special learning needs may not be given equal opportunities to direct play. In some cases, an adult facilitator may need to maintain control over a play-based experience to ensure that power dynamics between groups of children do not lead to unsafe or non-inclusive experiences. In those cases, collaborative play may not be an appropriate type of play-based learning to engage in.

Collaborative play-based learning, or guided play, is a type of play-based learning where adults and children share control of a playful experience, activity, or learning environment (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Zosh et al., 2018). Just like with adult-directed play, these playful experiences can occur in formal and non-formal settings but are always guided by a learning goal or objective.

Collaborative play creates opportunities for adults and children to interact and share control in the following ways:

- ✿ Deciding on the learning goal
- ✿ Providing materials and making decisions about the learning environment (e.g. indoor or outdoor play)
- ✿ Co-creating expectations for how to play with the materials or each other

How decision-making is divided between adults and children will depend on many contextual factors, like safety concerns, cultural values and perspectives, the child's developmental level, group dynamics (i.e., group size, special needs), and how comfortable the adult is releasing some control over the play and learning.

Learn more about gender-responsive pedagogy and inclusion of children with disabilities:

[United Nations Girls' Education Initiative: Knowledge Hub](#)

[Forum for African Women Educationalists: Gender Responsive Pedagogy Toolkit for Teachers and Schools](#)

[Including Children with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action \(UNICEF\)](#)

[Guidance: Including Children with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action: Education \(UNICEF\)](#)

Collaborative play enables child agency, trust-building, and mutual respect

With space to make decisions about their play and learning, children develop and practice

their agency during collaborative play. Agency is a child's ability to express their own perspectives, opinions, and ideas and take action in whatever way they choose (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Sirkko, 2019; Zosh et al., 2018).

Three components of children's agency:



Voice:

Children's perspectives, ideas, and preferences are heard.



Choice:

Children decide how they engage with learning experiences.



Ownership:

Children are co-participants in design and implementation.

Decision-making roles and responsibilities within collaborative play become more evident with a clearer understanding of participating children's interests and needs, clearly established learning goals, and a level of comfort among adults and children with sharing control of the experience. Thoughtfully planned play-based learning activities should ensure that opportunities for children to practice their agency happen during play, as opposed to after the play has ended.

Trust building and mutual respect are natural outcomes of collaborative play. There is a shift in the power dynamic between adults and children, and even between peers, as they negotiate elements of the play-based learning experience. Where adults would traditionally hold all of the power over learning, they are instead required to trust in the knowledge and abilities of children, share decision-making, and encourage children's leadership. Encouraging children's skills and abilities through positive reinforcement and allowing space for children to lead their learning also nurtures a strong and mutually trusting relationship between adults and children (Huson, 2019).

Practicing Agency through Collaborative Play-Based Learning

Solomon works with children who are affected by displacement. Many of the children he works with are dealing with big emotions, like anxiety and fear. Wanting to give the children the opportunity to share and express their emotions, Solomon creates space for discussion, offering multiple opportunities for children to speak if they want to. Solomon later sets up different play stations in response to what the children shared about their experiences. One station has equipment for a dodgeball game, with the ball symbolizing negative emotions. He also sets up a puppet show for acting out feelings and a writing station for sharing experiences. The children are free to visit any station in any order, and Solomon is there to offer support where needed.

Some considerations for using collaborative play:

The idea of releasing control over teaching and learning can be daunting for some facilitators, especially when the learning outcome is related to sensitive topics, such as sex and pregnancy. Collaborative play-based learning can also be difficult when cultural definitions of play do not align with the use of play-based learning, and when other barriers, such as cultural discrimination and little support to implement programming, exist.

With time, practice, and a good understanding of the children participating, it is possible to become comfortable with and enjoy collaborative play.

To facilitate the successful implementation of collaborative play in your programs, be clear on policy, curricular, and cultural and safety needs and consider the following:



Collaborative Play-Based Learning in Action

Teacher Aida has noticed her students' growing interest in environmental conservation. She reviews the science curriculum and plans a lesson on environmental care. She begins the lesson by discussing ways to protect the environment, like recycling and planting a garden. Aida then divides her students into groups, challenging them to creatively demonstrate one activity that promotes environmental stewardship. Groups present their ideas through role play, drawings, and artwork. After each presentation, Aida encourages the class to ask questions. During the group work and discussion, Aida helps clarify misconceptions and ask questions to deepen learning.

Who are the children and/or youth participating in the program?

What are their interests, lived experiences, and learning and development needs?

What are your program's learning goals?

Where can some decisions about learning goals be shared with children and youth participating in the program?

Where can activities be made more active or playful?

Identify what play looks like to the participants in your program and consider how your planned activities can be made more engaging with different materials and play that matches their understanding of it, which might include art, dance, drama, or imaginary play.

What are the program's time constraints?

Collaborative play may require more time than traditional methods for many reasons; for example, children and youth may need time to become comfortable with sharing their thoughts and ideas with an adult and taking on a leadership position.

Collaborative Play in Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Comprehensive sexuality education is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality. Many aspects of play-based learning align with UNESCO's leading guidance on delivering comprehensive sexual health education.

The following aspects of collaborative play are beneficial for teaching youth about sexual health.



Photo Credit: Julius Mahela

Collaborative play is grounded in co-creation

Co-creating play-based learning means children and youth are involved in designing, developing, and implementing play-based learning activities. This helps create trusting, safe spaces for play, where diverse perspectives and experiences can be shared without stigma or judgement.

When adult facilitators participate in play, they should make sure the learning objectives are clear and

appropriate. They can thoughtfully plan for enough time, space, and materials for play, focus on creating safe spaces to discuss sensitive topics and, most importantly, ensure the physical and emotional safety of children and youth.

Collaborative play is community-focused

The nature of collaborative play encourages the facilitator to “meet people where they play” (Kirsch, 2019) by considering how participants like to gather (e.g., in large or small groups), where participants like to gather, cultural norms related to how people gather and share experiences, and how different approaches to play can be used. Meeting people where they feel most comfortable helps make difficult conversations related to sexuality easier to navigate. And because children and youth are so engaged, they can be actively involved in ongoing assessment, reflection, and feedback about how the learning experience is going. In real time, facilitators can make sure information delivered is understood by participants, misconceptions are resolved, and safety and comfort to share personal information is regularly considered.

Collaborative play is an active teaching and learning method

In collaborative play, children and youth are actively involved in their learning, which offers opportunities for children to practice their agency and fosters socio-emotional skills that are important for engaging in critical conversations related to sexual health, resilience, self-efficacy, and overall development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Learn more about Comprehensive Sexuality Education:

[*Comprehensive Sex Education \(International Planned Parenthood Federation\)*](#)

[*Comprehensive Sexuality Education Implementation Toolkit \(UNESCO\)*](#)

Child-Directed Play-Based Learning



Child-Directed Play

- ✓ Open-ended
- ✓ Children lead play
- ✓ No adult direction, guidance is minimal

Child-directed play-based learning is also called free play. Unstructured free play is a common experience throughout a person's life. In play-based learning, free play looks like children being given the space to play without adult control or direction. Though an adult typically does not participate in free play, they might make time for children to play, make materials or resources available to children before and during their play, and ensure children are safe and happy as they play. Children engage in free play in many ways, inside and outside of formal education, such as playing freely with children in their neighbourhood, by themselves at home, and at break times during school.

Free play can support children's learning and development in the following ways:

- ✿ **Self-regulation:** Children learn to manage their behaviour and reactions.
- ✿ **Social skills:** Children build relationships by learning to listen to each other, take turns, share, and make decisions together.
- ✿ **Psychosocial well-being:** Free play provides children with a feeling of control and allows them to focus on the present, which can reduce feelings of stress.
- ✿ **Physical health:** Children nurture an active and healthy body and gain confidence as they test new ways of moving.

The self-regulation and socio-emotional skills children develop during free play have implications for later well-being and academic achievement (Ivrendi, 2016).

Child-Directed Play-Based Learning in Action

Ibrahim is a teacher at a primary school. At the start of each day, Ibrahim makes time for free play. He puts out balls, jump ropes, pencils and paper, building blocks, and other play materials for children to use if they wish. He watches as a group of children create their own game, dividing the school playing field into two halves, and trying to throw balls into a goal on the other team's side without leaving their half. Another group of children are writing a storybook about an imaginary character. Ibrahim observes the students in the first group practicing their communication skills, calling out to their teammates to watch for younger children who wander by. The other group of children are practicing their literacy skills as they create a story with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

What Is the Role of the Adult in Play-Based Learning?

The role of adults in play-based learning is critical for ensuring that learning is purposefully, appropriately, and successfully included in children's play. The adult can be a teacher or other kind of educator, like a school club facilitator, a community leader, or a parent or caregiver.

Strategies To Support Learning

Adults can support learning and development in the context of play by inviting children to play, helping them to solve conflicts in the context of play, and by asking and answering questions and emerging discoveries. Strategies to support learning will differ depending on context and the needs of children.

Three common strategies that adults, including teachers, facilitators, and parents or caregivers, can use to support children's learning and development in the context of play-based learning are:



Scaffolding



Modelling



Extending



Photo Credit: Julius Mahela



Scaffolding

Scaffolding means giving children specific support based on their needs and the goals of an activity to help them understand a concept or develop a new skill. Scaffolding can look like providing more support when needed or removing support when it is not needed. Adults who scaffold must also notice when children can benefit from a little more space or time to think. If children are given this time, they can achieve more independently and further develop their own agency.

Scaffolding strategies can help ensure that all children, including learners with typical and special learning needs, receive the support they need to thrive.



Modelling

Adults who use modelling can show children what the skills can look like in practice, so that children have a clear understanding of what they are expected to do.

The skills adults can model include:

- Those related to psychosocial and socio-emotional learning and well-being, such as demonstrating how to ask to join a play activity, ask to borrow materials, express emotions, and negotiate and resolve conflicts
- Those related to academics or specific subject skills, like modeling different counting strategies in math or sounding out words when reading



Extending

Extending learning means helping children extend their thinking and understanding of a concept by challenging them to build on what they already know or can do comfortably.

The most common ways to extend are by:

- Asking thought-provoking questions or questions that engage higher order thinking (e.g., “What would happen if...?” or “How could you verify...?” or “What conclusions can you draw from...?”)
- Providing additional or alternative materials that encourage children to explore concepts in different ways (e.g., using different materials to build structures of different strengths in science class)
- Challenging children to think critically, test a theory, reflect on their experiences, or try something new

Adults can give children time to think about a question and try to answer it on their own before telling them the answer. This helps children develop critical thinking skills and the ability to find solutions independently.

Rubrics

Use the [play characteristics rubric](#) to self-assess your understanding of the types of play-based learning or to assess how playful and aligned your activity is to one of the types of play.

Use the [play types rubric](#) to reflect on ways you can adapt your teaching practice to include additional opportunities for play-based learning.

Parents and Caregivers

Research shows that the parent-child relationship is the main driver of children's learning and development in the early years (Jeong et al., 2021). Through play, parents and caregivers can build a sensitive, responsive relationship with their child, one in which their child feels safe, secure, and loved. This feeling of safety and security can help a child better handle stress and reduce anxiety and tension (Right To Play, n.d.). When a parent makes time to play with their child and give their attention to the interaction, their child learns that they are valued, which has a positive effect on their self-image and confidence (James, 2015).

Parent play with children is important at any age, though what that play looks like will change as children grow from infancy through toddlerhood and beyond. In the early years, exposure to adversity can have a negative impact on brain development (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). Positive experiences, such as playful interactions with parents, promote healthy brain development, expanding and strengthening cognitive connections that are critical for learning through life (Ginsburg et al., 2007). Through play, children develop important executive function skills, such as planning, goal setting, staying focused on a task, and self-control (Zosh et al., 2018).


Discover how Right To Play's playful parenting program is making a difference:

[How Parents are Supporting Children's Learning and Development with Play](#)

[How the Power of Play Is Helping Children Worldwide Overcome Adversity](#)

Teachers and Facilitators

In a play-based learning environment, the teacher or facilitator of a lesson or activity may also be considered:

 **The planner:** A planner selects the play-based learning activities that align to a learning goal and sets up the classroom or learning space. The planner is one of the most important roles an adult can have in play-based learning. Planning ensures that play-based activities are prepared and well-organized in environments that are safe, inclusive, and focused on learning goals. In play-based learning, planning can look like:

- Thinking about the arrangement and set-up of the classroom or learning environment
- Drafting lesson or activity plans
- Setting up materials
- Making connections between children's interests and the goals of the lesson or activity

Providing Support in Play-Based Learning

Teacher Sana begins her reading lesson by reading aloud a story suggested in her curriculum that she knows her students will enjoy. She pauses on words she thinks some children may be unfamiliar with, asking questions like, "Who has heard this word before?" and "What do you think it means?" She also pauses to call attention to specific details in the story's illustrations. The students are then invited to create props from materials found around the classroom and use them to act out a continuation of the story. Sana circulates the room, asking questions and offering suggestions for props to create. She reminds children of important events that happened in the story and even joins in one student group's scenario.

The observer: The observer watches what children do and reflects on what they observe to support future planning and instruction. Teachers and facilitators take the knowledge they collect from observing participants and apply it in other roles for planning and instruction.

The instructor: The instructor supports children by scaffolding, modelling, and extending learning. The instructor is also a play partner and assessor. Interacting with children in the context of play allows the instructor to observe children actively using learned skills and provide important information for assessment purposes (i.e., adjusting planning and instruction based on the learning needs of children). In the role of instructor, teachers in a classroom and facilitators in non-formal programs can use direct instruction with play-based learning to make sure children develop skills and understand concepts. In direct instruction, the adult presents information to the children they work with. Direct instruction is often considered a more adult-centred approach because it requires children to follow the directions given to them with little space for agency.

***A note on direct instruction:** At Right To Play, we understand that direct instruction is still an important way to teach children skills for their academic achievement and holistic development, but it must be used alongside play-based learning in a balanced way to ensure students receive the highest quality instruction.*



Photo Credit: Round Designs Ltd

Play Characteristics Rubric

Play Characteristic	Skill Level			
	1 (Emergent)	2 (Beginning)	3 (Achieving)	4 (Expert)
Actively Engaging	Learning may provide some cognitive and affective stimulation (e.g., mood, feelings) but is not motivational or hands-on.	Concepts are cognitively and affectively stimulating and motivational, but children are not given opportunities to explore through hand-on experiences.	Offers hands-on and cognitively and affectively stimulating experiences that motivate children to learn.	Allows children to practice agency and foster self-efficacy through hands-on learning experiences.
Fun/Enjoyable	Experience is not enjoyable, but children are required to participate anyway.	Willingness to engage, but experience is not optimally enjoyable for the child.	Enjoyable and positive experiences with peers and adults, with materials and content that children want to engage in.	Enjoyable and positive experiences with peers and adults, with materials and content that children want to engage in. Increased enjoyment encourages greater confidence in children to practice agency and foster self-efficacy.
Meaningful	Children's interests and identities are not considered in learning and instruction.	Reflecting on children's interests to integrate into learning and instruction.	Makes connections to children's lived experiences, knowledge, and interests during learning and instruction.	Makes connections to children's lived experiences, knowledge, and interests during learning and instruction. Finds ways to connect curriculum to children's experiences and interests during lessons and in planning.
Imagination	Play is structured and rule-driven, requiring no creativity or imaginative thinking.	Children are engaged in play experiences that encourage imagination and creativity within a structured environment and with a selection of predetermined materials and ways of using those materials.	Children are engaged in play experiences that are flexible and open-ended. Imagination, curiosity, creativity, and risk-taking are encouraged as children explore and improvise, engaging in play and using materials in unique ways.	Children are engaged in play experiences that are flexible and open-ended. Curiosity, imagination, and risk-taking are encouraged as children explore materials, improvise, and use their imagination in unique ways. Children's imaginative thinking is used in everyday or complex thinking for the real world.
Agency	Children are not given any agency as they engage in play experiences.	Children are given some agency by being given the choice to engage in play in whatever way they chose; however, there are limitations on their choices, such as where they play, the length of time they play, and available materials for play.	Children can make choices about how, where, and when they play. They are able to practice their agency, which includes sharing their ideas and opinions to affect the play.	Children can make choices about how, where, and when they play. They practice their agency, which includes sharing their ideas and opinions to affect the play, and they are actively encouraged to do so by their support systems (e.g., family, community leaders, teachers, peers).

*Levels are cumulative

Play Types Rubric

Play Type	Skill Level			
	1 (Emergent)	2 (Beginning)	3 (Achieving)	4 (Expert)
Structured Games and Activities	Games are not aligned with a learning/development goal and are only used outside of learning experiences.	Games or activities introduced by an adult include clear and developmentally appropriate rules for specific social learning/development goals.	Games or activities introduced by an adult or child include clear and developmentally appropriate rules that scaffold and move play forward or toward a specific social and academic learning/development goal.	Games or activities introduced by an adult or child include clear and developmentally appropriate rules that scaffold and move play forward or toward a specific social and academic learning/development goal, and adults and/or children have opportunities to modify or direct the implementation of the game.
Collaborative Play	Play experiences are designed and implemented by the adult with no consultation or participation of the child.	Play experiences are designed and implemented with participation from both adult and child, however greater opportunities for leadership and control are given to the adult.	Play experiences are designed and implemented with shared participation and control by the adult and child.	Play experiences are designed and implemented with shared participation from both adult and child; however, greater opportunities for leadership and control are given to the child, while the adult supports and integrates appropriate learning opportunities.
Free Play	There are no opportunities for free play experiences, which do not include rules, structure, or adult facilitation.	Play experiences are open-ended and without specific goals. A child can make choices about how they play without adult intervention or involvement; however, when and where they play is decided by the adult.	Play experiences are open-ended and without specific goals. A child can make choices about how, where, and when they play, without adult intervention or involvement.	Play experiences are open-ended, without specific goals. A child can make choices about how, where, and when they play, without adult intervention or involvement in the enactment of the play. These play experiences are given regularly and/or are balanced with collaborative and structured play experiences.

*Levels are cumulative

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