

Playful Learning: Enhancing Education in the Early Grades

Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.

– Mr. Rogers

Introduction: Play Is Essential

Play is essential to a child’s development. Children learn about themselves, others, and the world around them primarily through play. Play helps children learn interpersonal skills and fosters curiosity, imagination, and creativity. While play is critical to a child’s healthy cognitive, physical, and social emotional development, the amount of time dedicated to play in the early grades has dwindled over the past two decades, as the emphasis on academics has increased.

The loss of playtime in the early grades, however, has not translated into long-term academic gains; instead, it has contributed to high levels of childhood anxiety and stress, serious misbehavior, and school disengagement. Integrating more active, play-based approaches to learning in the early grades is an urgent need, as is providing educators the autonomy needed to meaningfully accomplish this. This brief explores the value of play-based learning in the early elementary grades and offers corresponding recommendations for educators and policymakers on creating the educational environments where playful learning can flourish.

Impact of Play on Student Learning

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, play gives children the opportunity to develop their creativity and imagination, as well as physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is critical to healthy brain development. In addition, play allows children to create and explore a world they can master, building the confidence they will need to face future challenges.¹

Play is recognized by the United Nations as a fundamental right of children everywhere.² While everyone recognizes play when they see it, defining it is more difficult, largely because there are many kinds of play. Early childhood experts, however, agree on several key characteristics of playful experiences, described in Figure 1 below.³



Figure 1

Play-based learning (PBL), or guided play, is a type of play that shares all the same core characteristics described in Figure 1, but additionally involves a teacher or guide who provides more structure

¹ American Academy of Pediatrics. “The Importance of Play in Healthy Child Development.” <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/119/1/182/70699/The-Importance-of-Play-in-Promoting-Healthy-Child?autologincheck=redirected?nfToken=00000000-0000-0000-0000-000000000000>. Accessed on 8 September 2022.

² United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 31. <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention>. Accessed September 9, 2022.

³ <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/UNICEF-Lego-Foundation-Learning-through-Play.pdf>.

than is typical in free play. The teacher’s role in PBL is to balance a child’s need for autonomy with the necessary support to ensure all children master the lesson’s learning objectives.⁴



Figure 2: Types of Playful Experiences

PBL is a pedagogical practice that enhances academic learning. It also builds student agency, contributing to higher levels of motivation and greater ownership of learning. In turn, motivation and ownership of learning fuel ongoing academic achievement and long-term engagement in school.⁵

PBL also fosters the development of social and emotional knowledge and skills. Through play, children learn to forge connections with others, share, negotiate and resolve conflicts, as well as learn self-advocacy skills. Through guided, playful learning, children actively practice the skills they need to be social, caring, thinking, and productive citizens.⁶

Ages 3-5	Ages 6-8
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language, social-emotional, and cognitive skills are expanding rapidly. • Stimulation and learning through play, singing, and interacting are essential to healthy development. • Through play, young children explore and make sense of the world. • Play develops confidence, creativity, and imagination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PBL continues to be critical in early elementary school. • PBL often neglected in favor of academic-focused educational approaches. • Active, PBL approaches can transform educational experiences in the early grades. • PBL strengthens motivation to learn, improves outcomes, and results in durable learning.

Figure 3: Play at Different Ages

The School Day and Time for Play

Elementary school educators in Connecticut report feeling intense pressure to fill every moment of the school day with highly structured, academically rigorous tasks.⁷ Today’s early elementary school classrooms are much different places than they were even ten years ago. Play stations are gone, snack time eliminated, and recess reduced. Rigid curriculum pacing guides now dictate what must be taught and when, and little time remains in the day for playful learning. Deviating from the pacing guide, even for good reason, can negatively impact an educator’s performance review.

Loss of time dedicated to play began in earnest in 2001 with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which led to increased emphasis on math and reading skills in the early grades to prepare students for achievement tests beginning in grade three. Under NCLB, school districts were held accountable for making adequate yearly progress on test scores, which resulted in increased test preparation and more direct instruction.



Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in Math and Reading, implemented in 2010, pushed more math and reading skills down into the early grades, reducing the time allocated to other subjects, such as history, creative arts, and physical education, and leaving little time for play. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced NCLB in 2015 and eliminated the annual yearly progress (AYP) imperative but did not alter the existing annual assessment requirements for elementary school students, nor did it meaningfully broaden how schools are expected to measure student success. As a result, schools across the country slashed recess and eliminated PBL to dedicate more time to math, reading, and test preparation. In addition, many after-school programs for young children started to prioritize academics and homework completion over organized play, free play, and physical activity.

⁴ Weisberg, D.S., K. Hirsh-Pasek, R.M. Golinkoff, A.K. Kittredge, & D. Klahr. 2016. "Guided Play: Principles and Practices." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 25 (3): 177–82.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Weisberg, D.S., Golinkoff, R.M., & K. Hirsh-Pasek. 2016. *Becoming Brilliant: What Science Tells Us About Raising Successful Children*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

⁷ Commission on the Improvement of Instruction and Professional Development (2016). *Developmentally Appropriate Instructional Strategies in Grades K-3*. Accessible from: www.cea.org.

Harmful Impact of Play Deprivation

Since the passage of NCLB in 2002 and adoption of CCSS a decade ago, play-based developmental strategies were systematically replaced with more direct instruction, increased test preparation, and frequent test-taking. Students in kindergarten today routinely have homework, take standardized tests, and experience school-related stress. Elementary school educators in Connecticut report dramatic increases in student anxiety in the early grades as well as increased incidents of classroom misbehavior.⁸

Evidence from the National Institutes of Health, reported by *Education Week*, also notes that rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide are rising rapidly among school-age children, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or family income. Thirty-five percent of 14- to 18-year olds have a mental health crisis each year, which includes self-injury, suicide ideation, or attempted suicide. One in every five children has a diagnosable mental health disorder. The percentage of teens experiencing a depressive episode increased 37% from 2005 to 2014.⁹ Anxiety among adolescents nearly doubled over a ten-year span, from 7.97% in 2008 to 14.66% in 2018. (Among adults during the same period, the increase was much smaller—from 5.12% to 6.68%.)¹⁰

A common denominator underpinning these devastating childhood mental health statistics is the shift in the early grades away from developmentally appropriate play-based learning. The life-long impact of insufficient play for developing children is far more serious than many realize. Insufficient play can stunt emotional development and contribute to anxiety, depression, stress, and problems of attention and self-control.¹¹

Obstacles to Playful Learning

The misconception that play is frivolous and takes time from “real learning” is the biggest obstacle to implementing more PBL in the early grades. This misconception has resulted in more direct instruction and less playful learning, making school a less joyful

experience for many of our youngest learners. More must be done to help parents, school administrators, and policymakers understand how important play is to children’s cognitive development and success in school, as well as to their physical and mental health.

In addition, the CCSS for the early elementary grades includes only a few references to play-based learning benefits, activities, or teaching methods.



Consequently, Connecticut standards that flow from CCSS also neglect the value of play in supporting student learning. As a result, very little, if any, professional development is provided to educators on the importance of play or how to create high-quality PBL activities.

Another major obstacle is a lack of teacher autonomy. Educators are often prevented from making basic decisions about how to teach their students. Most must rigidly adhere to the district curriculum pacing guide, even when it is clear that adjustments are needed. The brains of young children develop extremely rapidly, but each at their own pace. Teachers must have the autonomy to make curricular and instructional decisions in response to the unique needs of the students in their classrooms.

Large class sizes can also be an obstacle to more PLB. When more than 20 children in the early grades are in a relatively small space, it is challenging to give them active experiences and personalized guidance. Large class sizes can be a strain on the classroom resources available for students, and resources schoolwide are often insufficient. Overcrowding can also create significant classroom management challenges that prevent schools from incorporating PBL.¹²

⁸ Commission on Instruction and Professional Development (2016). Developmentally Appropriate Instruction in Grades K-3. Accessible from www.cea.org.

⁹ Prothera, A. (Feb. 13, 2020). *Education Week*. “Schools Are the Main Source of Student Mental Health Care. Are They Ready?” <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/schools-are-the-main-source-of-student-mental-health-care-are-they-ready/2020/02>. Accessed February 26, 2021.

¹⁰ Goodwin, R., et al. (Aug. 21, 2020) “Trends in anxiety among adults in the United States, 2008–2018: Rapid increases among young adults” National Institutes of Health, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7441973/>. Journal of Psychiatric Research (2020 Nov; 130: 441–446)., Accessed April 27, 2021.

¹¹ American Academy of Pediatrics. “The Importance of Play in Healthy Child Development.” <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/119/1/182/70699/The-Importance-of-Play-in-Promoting-Healthy-Child?autologincheck=redirected&nfToken=00000000-0000-0000-0000-000000000000>. Accessed September 8, 2022.

¹² Learning Through Play (2018). <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/UNICEF-Lego-Foundation-Learning-through-Play.pdf>. Accessed September 23, 2022

Recommendations:

- Implement legislation that affirms a child's right to play and states that PBL is an essential feature of effective early learning.
- Implement a play-based universal pre-K program in Connecticut.
- Raise the kindergarten start age to five.
- Reduce class sizes in early grades.
- Provide professional development in play-based learning to elementary teachers and administrators and ensure adequate resources to implement PBL lessons.
- Convene a task force of early childhood educators and other experts to revise the CCSS for grades K-2 to ensure they are developmentally appropriate and include opportunities to incorporate PBL strategies.
- Ensure that play and active child-centered learning and teaching are core values of national, state, and local curricula for early grades.
- Ensure adequate supply of indoor and outdoor games, toys, manipulatives, and other learning materials to support implementation of play-based learning.
- Provide practical resources to help parents, teachers, administrators, and policymakers understand the value of play.
- Reduce emphasis on standardized measures of student achievement and broaden the scope of competencies and skills that are assessed.
- Provide teachers more autonomy over how best to meet the instructional needs of students.



For more information, please visit cea.org/legislative-resources.

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