

Play Today
A Guide for Families



Ministry of
Education

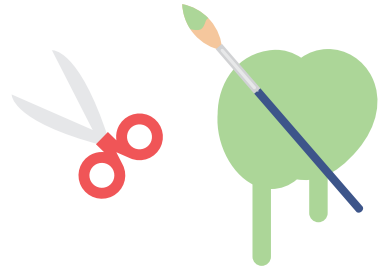
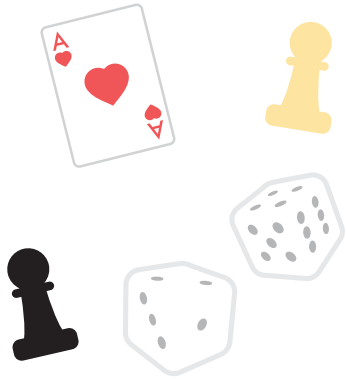
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Introduction

Children’s play experiences have a profound impact on all areas of their growth, learning, and development. *Play Today: A Guide for Families* describes ideas and examples of quality play experiences that can be offered to preschool and school-age children by their families and caregivers.

This guide puts a focus on play-based learning for children from age three to eight (approximately Grade 3). It includes examples of a range of play experiences that benefit children’s learning. The examples include opportunities for play that children lead, as well as those that adults may guide. It also explains how learning happens and invites family members and caregivers to consider the value of play experiences for learning at home and elsewhere.

Play and have fun with your child! Play is one of the best ways to support all learning and development and it should continue to provide joy throughout everyone’s life.

Let’s play, today!

Play

Sometimes, children direct their own play without the participation of adults. Other times, adults notice opportunities to join the play of children and extend their ideas, understanding, or skills. Adults may guide children’s play while respecting their interests and skills. Sometimes, adults may set up specific play experiences to achieve a learning goal. Children benefit and learn from many kinds of play.

Approaches to Play

This guide describes five approaches to play-based learning. The role of adults varies — from respectful observer and helper to leaders and directors of the play. Children’s learning resulting from these experiences also varies. Children benefit from all types of play experiences. At the same time, children often show strong preferences for a specific play approach. The types of play described here are not in any order and are simply a way of describing types of play experiences.

Types of Adult Approaches to Play



Adapted from Pyle and Danniels, 2017¹

Play takes place in many places and spaces—at home, in preschools, child-care centres, at family centres, in playgrounds, and in school classrooms. Children’s culture, community, and family life shape their play. Play experiences may vary but when families value and champion play, children’s learning soars.

The *Play Today: A Guide for Families* is designed to help support families to value and expand the opportunities for learning that play can offer.

¹ Pyle, A., & Danniels, E. (2017). A continuum of play-based learning: The role of the teacher in play-based pedagogy and the fear of hijacking play, *Early Education and Development*, 28(3), 274-289.

Free Play

How learning happens during this approach: Free play is play that is initiated and directed by children. It is the children who make decisions about what happens next and who does what.

When adults are asked to think about memories from childhood play, they often recall pretend play scenes with toys, dolls, or stuffed animals. They may recall exploring a patch of brush outdoors with a friend in search of wild animals, running as fast as possible, and collapsing in a heap, shrieking with delight. Other adults recall running, jumping, and climbing outside with friends without adult direction.

Here are two examples of Free Play: Sand Play and Hide-and-Seek.



Sand Play

Marsha takes her two children, three-year-old Marvin and five-year-old Sasha, to the park where there is a large sandbox. The children each carry a shovel and pail. Marsha sits on a nearby bench as Marvin and Sasha rush to the sandbox, with squeals of delight.

Sasha quickly fills her pail with dry sand, stands up, and pours the sand back into the sandbox. She then runs to the water pump on the other side of the sandbox and fills her pail with water, walks back to Marvin, carefully holds the pail

and watches to see if water splashes out. Sasha sits down beside Marvin and pours the water over a small area of sand. She quickly puts the wet sand back into the pail, patting the sand down firmly. She carefully tips the pail upside down and gently taps on the sides and bottom of the pail until the sand forms slips out of the pail. She repeats this five times until she has five sand forms in a row.

Marvin begins by digging a hole in the sand and shouts out to his mother, "Mommy, mommy, look!

I am digging the biggest hole.”

Marsha smiles and says, “Wow, that is very big!”

Marsha watches as Sasha fills her pail with water and carefully carries it back across the sandbox. Marsha recalls that only six weeks ago, Sasha would call out for help to carry the water since it kept spilling out as she walked. She notes that Sasha is now able to walk smoothly and carefully so that the water stays in the pail.

Marvin looks over to Sasha’s forms in the sand. He asks, “What’s that?” Sasha replies, “It’s going to be a fort.” The fort she has planned is for two small dolls she carries in her backpack. She then points to a tree beside the sandbox. “You can help. Get some leaves and stones from under the trees over there.” Marvin scrambles out of the sandbox and runs over to the trees to pick up a few leaves and races back to give them to Sasha who says, “Good, but we need lots more. We need a big pile.”

Marvin turns around and starts to head back to the tree, but then he stops and runs over to pick up his pail. He then heads to the tree and fills it with leaves. He notices some twigs and puts those in his pail too. Marvin returns to Sasha who is stacking up the leaves in separate piles around the sand forms.



Sasha says, “Good. Now dump them here,” pointing to a space beside the forms, “and go back and get some rocks.”

Marvin runs back to a patch of small rocks that are under the tree.

Sasha and Marvin practice many skills in the sandbox at the park. Sasha is familiar with the possibilities of sand and water from past play experiences. She immediately heads to the water source. She has a design in mind for her fort and has a plan of how to build it.

When Marvin joins Sasha’s play, he shows he can co-operate with her play. He understands that Sasha’s directions are part of the pretend play story about the fort.

Marsha sits quietly watching the children. She is ready to join if they call her over or answer questions, but she does not initiate conversation. She is paying attention to what they can do. She notes how they are sharing the idea of building a fort and for now, their ability to co-operate.



Hide-and-Seek

Several children from a grade 2/3 class are playing a game. It is January, and the skies are cloudy, but only a bit of drizzle is coming down. Several children are playing a game of hide-and-seek in the school playground. Cardboard boxes and large crawling tubes scatter the yard, offering various places to hide. The rules for the hide-and-seek game evolved among the children over the past few weeks. The hide-and-seek game is the current favourite of the children.

Often the children ask a teacher to join. Finding the teacher is a central part of the game. Once found, the teacher must run and then be caught by chasing children. The teachers only join at the children's requests, and they follow the rules that the children have established.

Everyone does a lot of running, laughing, and yelling.

The teacher organizes time and space for outdoor play that is directed by the children. She knows that children need enough time to invest in play experiences that they design and direct. If play is likely to be interrupted in a few minutes, not much happens. These play opportunities can be used to observe and gather information about children's social and physical skills. Observations of children during these times provide valuable information that enhances understanding of the children's skills and abilities.

Children are learning to negotiate and cooperate with others as well as practicing physical skills such as running, jumping, and dodging. Perhaps most importantly, this time for active play is essential for healthy children. Improving these skills builds self-confidence and independence.

Inquiry Play

How learning happens during this approach: Inquiry means exploring to find out information or new understanding. Inquiry play starts with children’s explorations of things that interest or puzzle them. This kind of exploring helps children to see connections between objects, ideas, meanings, and imaginings. More questions lead to figuring out ideas and theories about how the world around them works.

Adults pay attention to what children notice and ask them questions about their ideas. They do not tell children the answers. Instead, adults support children to think more deeply and to test their ideas. Inquiry play nurtures scientific thinking—identifying a problem, developing a hypothesis (a theory), testing it, changing it, and testing it again. Often, inquiry play involves representing ideas in drawings, print, or photographs.

Here are two examples of Inquiry Play: Gardening With Kids and The Big Building.



Gardening with Kids

Six-year-old twins, Michah and Gabby, are outside in their backyard with their Auntie Valerie who is staying at their house for a few weeks. It is late spring and leaves are sprouting on trees. Tulips are up and almost blooming in the garden.

It rained earlier in the day and both the ground and cement path are still wet. “Look, auntie!” shouts Michah. “There are worms everywhere,” pointing to the path. “At school, we put worms into our big pot of dirt when we planted bean seeds. Worms are good for growing green things.”

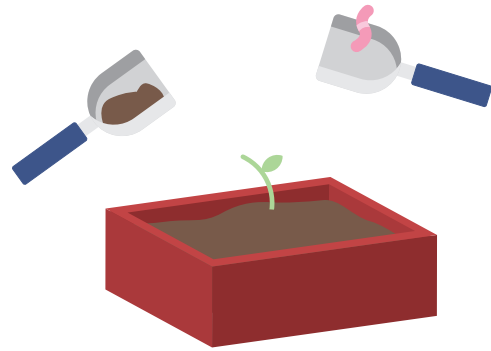
Gabby suggests that they pick up the worms and put them in the garden. Both girls race to gather up the worms and place them in the soil.

Valerie asks, “Why do you think the worms will help things grow in the garden?”

“Maybe they have magic powers,” suggests Michah.

“Or maybe they have special spit that comes out and makes plants grow,” adds Gabby.

“I wonder how we could find out what worms do in the dirt that helps the plants,” says Valerie.



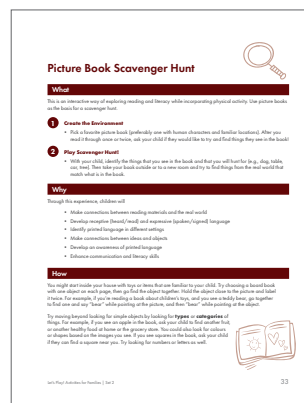
Michah points out that there are worms everywhere and remembers an earlier experience with worms. She makes the connection with previous learning—that worms were added to the pot with bean seeds at school.

Gabby builds on Michah’s knowledge and applies it to the immediate situation. Both girls come up with theories about why the worms help plants grow.

Valerie asks questions to find out what the children are thinking—what their ideas are. Her response respects their theories and opens possibilities to explore the question of how worms help plants.

Try this Activity!

The Gardening with Kids activity is in *Let’s Play! Activities for Families*. You can find this activity in Set 3: Identities, Social Responsibility, and Diversity.



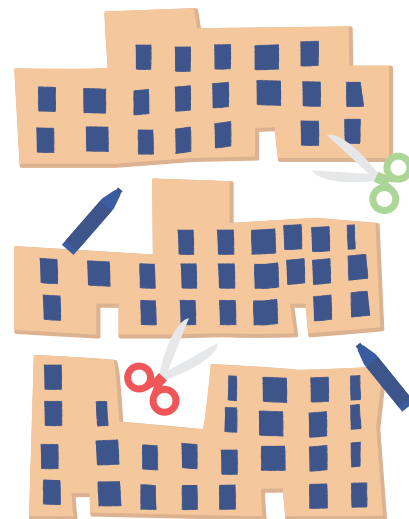


The Big Building

A group of preschool children watch the construction of a condo building next door. Children stand at the fence and watch the parade of cement mixers, diggers, front-end loaders, and cranes. Three-year-old Connor plays exclusively with vehicles and sits down on a tricycle and moves back and forth, making his usual rumbling sound. Other children ride over on tricycles and wagons and join Connor. Then several children decide to bring over large building blocks, cardboard tubes, large empty boxes, and hard hats from the storage shed. The children eagerly begin to construct a building they call “the big building.”

Several days later, the children’s construction area includes structures made out of blocks, tubes, boxes, picture, and word signs. They give directions for construction vehicles and warnings of danger and give out pails and shovels for hauling sand around in the sandbox. From time to time, Yasmeen, an Early Childhood Educator, joins the play. She asks lots of questions about how they manage to keep the building from falling over and what the construction workers are doing.

One day, Yasmeen decides to extend the outside playtime. She brings out some large sheets of paper and tapes them on a nearby table. Then, Yasmeen invites children to draw a picture of the construction site. Four children come to the table, pick up the markers Yasmeen has placed on the table and start to draw. Yasmeen encourages them to look over to the construction site and think about details of the equipment and the large hole in the ground.



The children ask more and more questions about the construction vehicles and about the many tools the workers use. Four-year-old Emily wants to know how the water and electricity will be part of the building. Yasmeen brings in several picture books about construction from the local library. She tells the children that she does not know the answers, but she can help them find more information in the book. Hassan suggests they use the Internet in the library to look up more information. Several children are drawing pictures about building construction and asking how to spell words like “condominium” and “excavator.” Yasmeen and the children now take pictures every morning and document what progress they observe in a book they are making called “The Big Building.”

The following week, Yasmeen again sets up the nearby table with paper and markers and invites the children to draw pictures. She notices that children are drawing pictures with much more detail in their illustrations of the equipment and construction site. Yasmeen invites Connor over to the table by offering to draw a front-end loader.

As the play outside continues to develop a narrative about construction workers and powerful machines, Yasmeen suggests that they write a script together for a play. The children contribute handwritten notes and drawings that are transferred to the computer. They work together to prepare a play about building a very tall building with lots of playrooms, including one with a large bouncy castle.



Yasmeen responds to the children’s interests and ideas. She asks questions to figure out what they are thinking. She asks questions to provoke their curiosity to explore and understand more about the construction site and encourages them to represent their ideas in pictures and in a dramatic play. She joins in with children’s explorations about water and electricity.

Children learn about problem solving, planning, and how to use resources to find out how things work. They learn new vocabulary and ways to represent ideas with words and illustrations.

Collaborative Play

How learning happens during this approach: Collaborative play happens when children are directing their own play (free play) and adults see an opportunity to enter the children’s play to extend a learning opportunity. Adults do not take over the play or redirect it (except for safety reasons). Adults may offer instructions about a specific skill — such as how to hold the paper to cut out a circle, or they may introduce specific resources such as books.

Here are two examples of Collaborative Play: Picture Book Scavenger Hunt and The Crane.



Picture Book Scavenger Hunt

Alex reads a book about how machines work with his six-year-old son Manuel. Manuel chose the book from the school library to bring home. The book details illustrations and descriptions about machines that are common in many homes including blenders, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, computers, cellphones, and hair dryers.

Manuel asks a lot of questions about why some machines need to be plugged in while others work without plugs. Alex suggests that they have a search for these machines in their home to see which ones have electrical cords and plugs and which ones do not. As Manuel finds each one, he turns it on and off.

Manuel points out, “Cellphones don’t need to be plugged into the wall. They get electricity from the charger—the electricity is inside the charger.”

“Hmm...,” responds Alex. “Here is my cellphone and it is not charged now. Let’s use the charger but not plug it into the wall and see what happens.”

Manuel eagerly plugs in the charger to his Dad’s cellphone. They go back to finding other machines from the book, and they make a list of machines they have and ones they do not have, such as an ice maker.

An hour later, they finish the book and find that they own 16 machines that are in the book but do not own the other 12 listed. Alex suggests that they check his cellphone.

Manuel looks puzzled and says, “Dad, your phone is still dead and not charged.”

Alex replies, “OK, now let’s plug the other end of the charger into the electrical outlet.” Almost immediately, the cellphone lights up and the charging symbol shows on the screen. He explains how electricity travels into their house, through the wires that are in the walls. He explains how the charger works to take in the electricity and uses it to recharge the phone but that the charger does not have its own source of electricity.



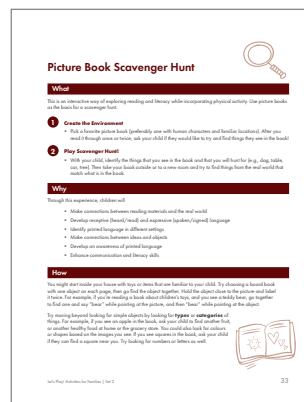
Manuel makes connections between reading materials and the world he lives in. He uses books to find out how things work. He also reinforces his understanding of print. He combines his understanding of the attributes of different objects and how they can be categorized. He thinks about problems and predicts solutions.

Alex joins the play experience with Manuel by reading the book Manuel chose. He uses what is sometimes called a “teachable moment” to bridge Manuel’s partial understanding of electricity to how cellphone chargers work with electricity.

Playful learning includes play experiences that are planned by adults with specific learning goals in mind. Children engage in the play and can have an active role in how the play unfolds within the structure adults have set up.

Try this Activity!

The Picture Book Scavenger Hunt activity is in *Let’s Play! Activities for Families*. You can find this activity in Set 2: Communications and Literacies





The Crane

Michaela, an educator in a StrongStart BC program, notices that three-year-old Ivan and Lindsey are deeply engaged with the unit blocks and Lego in the construction play area. Ivan lines up several unit blocks on the floor. He places a tall stack of Lego blocks on one end of the blocks, and it falls over. After observing for several minutes, Michaela decides to find out Ivan and Lindsey's understanding about why the blocks fall down, and what they are trying to do.

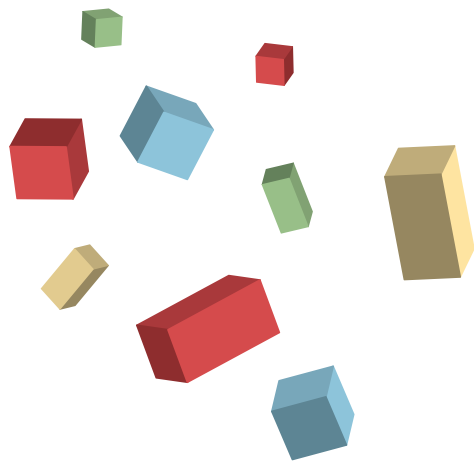
Michaela asks, "What are you trying to do, Ivan?"

Ivan responds, "We are making a really big crane."

Lindsey adds, "It is going to pick up the concrete for the tower." Ivan turns to Michaela and asks, "Can you help us get the crane to stay standing up?" Michaela responds, "Of course. Which way do you want the crane to face?"

Ivan says, "It has to face the concrete" as he points to a pile of small rocks beside the wooden blocks. Michaela places the tower on a block in front of the rocks. It falls over.

Michaela asks, "Why do you think it keeps falling over?" Ivan says, "Because it doesn't stick to the block." Michaela responds, "So, how could we get it to stick?" Lindsey shouts out, "We need to glue it."



Michaela says, "That is a very good idea. But then it would always be stuck on the block. How would the block fit back in the shelf?"

Ivan suggests, "Let's use tape. When we are finished, we can take the tape off." Michaela answers, "You thought of a good way to solve that problem. Let's find the tape."



Michaela uses play materials that can be transformed by the children. She enters the children's play to extend their ideas, thereby extending the learning opportunity. She builds on the children's intentions but does not take over the play. She provokes them to think about their problem and possible solutions. She supports their understanding of themselves as learners by asking them to figure out how to keep the crane standing.



Playful Learning

How learning happens during this approach: Playful learning includes play experiences that are planned by adults with specific learning goals in mind. Children engage in the play and can have an active role in how the play unfolds within the structure adults have set up.

Here are two examples of Playful Learning: Discovery Toy Basket and Pumpkin Cake.



Discovery Toy Basket

Mary Jean sets up a “discovery toy basket” for her four-year-old daughter, Ellie. She plans to introduce it after nap time. Mary Jean places several found objects—keys, rocks, a large pine cone, spoons, and a sponge—into a basket. The objects are from around their home and Ellie is familiar with them. Mary Jean covers the basket with a small blanket.

Once Ellie is awake and ready to play after her nap, Mary Jean sits beside her and brings out the basket.

Mary Jean asks Ellie, “Can you put your hands under the blanket and tell me what you feel without taking the blanket off?”

Ellie is interested and curious and puts one hand in slowly. She grasps a sponge and says, “This is squishy.”

Mary Jean asks, “What do you think it is?”

Ellie answers, “Is it my facecloth?” Mary Jean suggests she feel it again.

Ellie puts in both hands and feels around the sponge then squeals, “I know, I know— this is what we wash dishes with!”

Mary Jean smiles and says “Yes, it is—what do we call it?”

Ellie pulls it out from under the blanket and looks puzzled. She turns to Mary Jean and says, “I don’t know what it is called.”

Mary Jean replies, “It is a sponge.”

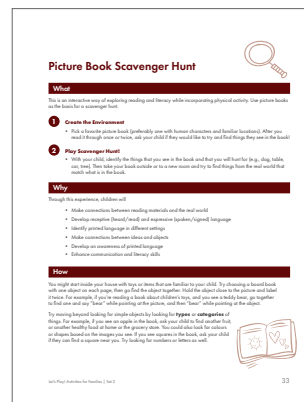
Mary Jean does the same thing with the other objects in the basket and then gives Ellie time to explore the items on her own.



The discovery toy basket offers opportunities for exploring the characteristics of various objects. It invites conversations about what objects are used for and encourages the use of new vocabulary.

Try this Activity!

The Discovery Toy Basket activity is in *Let’s Play! Activities for Families*. You can find this activity in Set 1: Engagement with Others, Materials and the World





Pumpkin Cake

A group of five children in an after-school program located in an elementary school gather around a table in the school kitchen. William, the educator who facilitates the program, tapes a large sheet of paper with a recipe for pumpkin cake on the wall behind the table. It is autumn, and the children were recently at a local market that had a large selection of pumpkins.

Together the children and William read through the recipe. Six-year-old Sophie slowly sounds out the word “sugar” and says, “I know where the sugar is. I will get it.”

William asks, “How much sugar will we need?”

Seven-year-old Thomas replies, “2 ½ cups—that’s what the recipe says,” pointing to the recipe on the wall.

“Right.” says William. “Thomas, we have a ½ cup measuring cup here. Can we use that to measure out 2 1/2 cups of sugar?”

Thomas replies, “We need to add three of those to the bowl.”

William pulls out a 1 cup measuring cup and asks Thomas again. Sophie says, “I think two of the small cups will fill the big cup.”



Slowly, William guides the children through the measurement of all the ingredients, emphasizing that $\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2}$ equals 1. After the pumpkin cake is in the oven, the children review the recipe chart.

William asks them to make their own recipe card for pumpkin cake. He encourages them to make drawings of each of the ingredients to show how much is needed for the recipe.



William sets up the play experience with specific learning goals in mind. He introduces measurement concepts to the children. He uses visual cues and vocabulary to introduce and practice measurement concepts. The written recipe with visual symbols reinforces children's understanding that print carries meaning. William sets up the materials for the play experience in a way that invites children to focus.

The children are active participants. They decide how to stir the ingredients together and may suggest some additions. They make up their own drawings for recipe cards—some will insert numbers and others will try to show $\frac{1}{2}$ cups or 2 cups to represent amounts.

Learning Games

How learning happens during this approach: Learning games, which include instructions, are adult-directed types of play. Sometimes, the instruction comes in the form of rules that guide how a game is played or through structured materials used in a specific manner, such as a puzzle.

Learning games are helpful to introduce and practice concepts related to reading or mathematics. They are also useful for social-emotional learning and basic physical movement skills. When children play games together, they practice social skills such as taking turns. Games can also encourage children’s attention and focus on something that is challenging.

Here are two examples of Learning Games: Yoga Poses and Number Line Game.



Yoga Poses

Leona is the mother of three-year-old Lauren. Leona began to take yoga classes a year ago at the local community centre. She finds that she is now better able to manage the demands of work and family. She also finds that when she is stressed, she becomes calmer— and more effective in dealing with home or workplace stresses—by taking a yoga break and doing a few poses.

Leona is introducing time for yoga poses with Lauren at the end of the day when they get home. They begin by bringing out their yoga mats in the living room, turning down the lights, and turning off radios, televisions, i-Pads, and cellphones. Leona asks Lauren to sit quietly and take a few deep breaths.

Leona speaks slowly and quietly. “Close your eyes. Slowly breathe through your nose.” She

pauses and then continues, “Feel your body get ready for yoga. Slowly open your eyes.” Sometimes, she asks Lauren, “How do you feel inside? How does your body feel? Are you feeling tired or are you feeling awake?”

Now Leona is ready to do a few poses with Lauren. She begins with the child’s pose. She says, “Let’s do the child’s pose.”

Leona helps Lauren to do the Child’s Pose by guiding her to lower her forehead to the ground and extend her arms out in front.

Leona watches Lauren as she does the pose and comes back to a sitting position. After completing two more poses—Downward Dog Pose and Tree Pose—Leona asks Lauren to take a few more deep breaths and asks, “How does your body feel now? I feel calmer than when I first came home.”

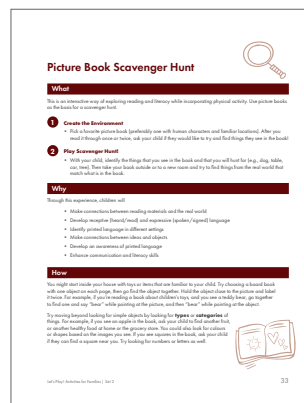


Leona directs the play activity. She sets up the environment by making a few minutes of yoga with Lauren a routine after she arrives home. She organizes the living room so that it is easy to stretch out in an open space. The yoga time is structured with specific goals related to develop positive coping skills and manage emotions and stress. She introduces poses based on Lauren’s emerging skills. She is attentive to Lauren’s progress with the poses and asks questions that draws her attention to how her body feels.

Learning games are play opportunities that often challenge children to stretch their thinking, number and language, social-emotional, and physical skills. Adults can structure the games so that challenges are manageable and not beyond what a child knows or can do with assistance.

Try this Activity!

The Yoga Poses activity is in *Let’s Play! Activities for Families*. You can find this activity in Set 4: Well-Being and Belonging





Number Line Game

Four-year-old Idris enters his preschool with his auntie. He immediately runs to the table with a new game set up. He yells out, “Auntie, auntie—look, this one is using the acorns I brought yesterday.”

On the table is a number line game set up for three players. Each player has several acorns. The children take turns tossing a large dice and then placing that number of acorns on one of the number lines that are numbered squares from one to ten. When children can do this, Emmanuel, the educator, will add more acorns and extend the game with longer number lines.

Idris sits down and tosses the dice. It comes up with two circles. Idris places two acorns on the number one and number two squares on his number line. Then he tosses the dice again, and it has three circles.

He places three acorns along the next three squares on the number line. Emmanuel observes and asks, “So what number are you up to now?” Idris smiles and starts at the first square counting up to five where the acorn is placed. Emmanuel takes note of Idris’ number understanding as he watches, smiling, and nodding.



Emmanuel prepared a game with specific rules. The rules are based on specific learning objectives. The game is designed to instruct children about mathematical concepts related to counting and simple computation. Idris is learning to identify and compare numbers as well as counting and simple addition.

The game can be adapted to fit with children’s individual understanding. Emmanuel assesses what Idris understands about numbers and basic counting and can adapt the complexity of the game.

The children are active participants in the game. They are guided by the rules, and the rules can be adjusted to what a child understands. The goal is to offer a challenge that is within a child’s reach to meet.

Conclusion

Children's experiences differ across cultures and communities so their play may look different in various settings, but its power to delight and captivate children's hearts and minds is universal.

Play encourages children to be curious, creative, and engaged lifelong learners. It provides children with motivation to explore, come up with ideas, connect with others, and imagine new possibilities. Play can be challenging, joyful, intense, and exciting. Play can also be relaxing, calm and soothing. Play is a platform for learning from birth into adulthood. It is a vehicle for inspiring learning.

This guide is based on the *Play Today: B.C. Handbook* and draws on activities in *Let's Play: Activities for Families*. In these early learning resources, the benefits of play experiences are highlighted so that adults are assured that play experiences are valuable to children for their learning and development.

Resources

BC Ministry of Education. (2019). *Play Today: B.C. Handbook*. Retrieved from: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/early-learning/teach/earlylearning/play-today-handbook.pdf>

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