



## THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN KINDERGARTEN



### Observing Children & Play

The Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS) is an observational tool for teachers to understand the developmental readiness of children entering kindergarten. KIDS enables teachers to assess students' development while they go about their daily classroom routines, including during play.

### What is Play?

"Play" describes activities that are freely chosen and directed by children. Teachers facilitate and construct play in kindergarten classrooms through child-directed time in centers (e.g., block play, dramatic play, sand and water play) and more structured, playful learning (e.g., finger plays, songs, and games that connect to content learning). No matter the specifics, implementing play in the classroom includes planned, purposeful activities. Productive and intentional play builds on children's initiative and interests but does not descend into chaos.

### Why Play in Kindergarten?

Research shows that play-based learning is essential for children's academic, social, emotional, and physical development. Additionally, play is the most accessible approach to learning for young children. Kindergartners' brains are wired to learning *in context*, meaning they learn from parts of something larger rather than the immediate task at hand. For example, a child acting as a cashier while playing store with classmates could be practicing one-to-one correspondence and learning the concept of numbers in a more effective way than children practicing this concept on a worksheet.

Play is fun for children. Evidence suggests that children love playing because it allows them to practice, apply, and extend new learning. Playful learning helps children develop social relationships and connectivity, which are important to a child's persistence in school, love of learning, and self-efficacy.

### Using Intentional Play as a Teaching Strategy

Play is essential to learning for all kindergartners. It can be academically rigorous and support gaps in a child's development. Using playful learning as a teaching strategy requires teachers to plan in the same way they would with more didactic methods. On the following page are a few ways that Illinois kindergarten teachers are already using play as an effective learning modality with all children.

**"Children learn  
as they play.  
Most importantly,  
in play, children  
learn *how*  
to learn."**

*-O.F. Donaldson,  
play researcher*



## Examples of Intentional Play as a Teaching Strategy

Examples of Play as an Intentional Instructional Strategy	Connections to Academic Development	Connections to KIDS Measures
Support students in play-acting stories from their own lives or retelling their favorite picture books, in small or whole group.	Literacy	ATL-REG 2; SED 4; LLD 3; LLD 6
Incorporate picture books with relevant themes into the block center to encourage children to connect stories to their buildings/sculptures. Consider adding other manipulatives that expand the possibilities, like cars, people, and animal figures. Ask open-ended questions with children about what they're building.	Literacy Mathematics/Engineering	ATL-REG 1, SED 3; LLD 3; LLD 4; COG: MATH 1
Use board games like Chutes and Ladders and card games like Uno to practice discrete skills like one-to-one correspondence, patterning, patience, and turn-taking.	Mathematics	SED 4; LLD 8; LLD 9; COG: MATH 2 COG: MATH 3
Work with families to collect clean materials like tissue boxes, paper towel tubes, and cereal boxes for children to explore and manipulate in a center. Materials could be introduced in art, STEM, or building centers.	Mathematics/Engineering Science Arts	ATL-REG 3; COG: MATH 6

## For More Information

Interested in learning more? Check out these great resources on strategically using play in kindergarten.

### Organizations

- [National Association for the Education of Young Children: Play and Children's Learning](#)
- [ASCD: Best Schools](#)
- [The National Institute for Play](#)

### Other Resources:

- Almon, J. 2013. [The Value of Play in Early Education, and How to Get Teachers on Board](#). Principal. Issue September/October 2013. Washington, DC: National Association of Elementary School Principals.
- Bohart, H., Charner, K., & Koralek, D. G. 2015. *Spotlight on young children: exploring play*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Copple, C., & Bredekamp, S. 2012. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Dillon, J. 2016. *Invisible Learning*. SmartBrief.
- Ginsburg, K. 2007. [The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds](#). Pediatrics; Vol 119, Issue 1. Washington, DC: American Academy of Pediatrics.
- Snow, K. (n.d.). [Research News You Can Use: Debunking the Play vs. Learning Dichotomy](#). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- [Additional recommendations from NAEYC](#)