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

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<th>Examples of Play as an Intentional Instructional Strategy</th>
<th>Connections to Academic Development</th>
<th>Connections to KIDS Measures</th>
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<td>Support students in play-acting stories from their own lives or retelling their favorite picture books, in small or whole group.</td>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>ATL-REG 2; SED 4; LLD 3; LLD 6</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>Literacy Mathematics/Engineering</td>
<td>ATL-REG 1, SED 3; LLD 3; LLD 4; COG: MATH 1</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>SED 4; LLD 8; LLD 9; COG: MATH 2 COG: MATH 3</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>Mathematics/Engineering Science Arts</td>
<td>ATL-REG 3; COG: MATH 6</td>
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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:
- Additional recommendations from NAEYC