

Everyone Plays!

Recapturing Play for Children with Special Needs

Lin Moore and Elaine Zweig

A child with a special need moves quickly toward children who are playing a game at a table in the classroom. He shoves one of the children out of the way and disturbs the pieces of the game on the table. Does this sound familiar? Children with learning and thinking differences sometimes lack impulse control and have difficulty filtering their words or actions. They may not pay attention or be unknowingly insulting. It is possible that the child does not realize when he is being too forceful.

Children with special needs may have less access to play due to the nature of their developmental delay or disability or their lack of experience with typically developing peers. Many preschools and kindergartens have reduced play in their daily schedules and elementary schools have reduced or eliminated recess (Jarrett et al., 2015; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006). The current focus on state standards, push-down curricula, academic rigor, and accountability further leaves teachers wondering how to do it all (Mraz et al., 2016; Riley-Ayers & Figueras-Daniel, 2019). Consequently, we are facing a disappearance of play (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Rentzou et al., 2019). As early childhood educators, we are responsible to ensure that all children have access to play opportunities and can fully participate in child-directed free play and play-based curriculum experiences. Children with special needs may require additional supports for access and full participation (Division for Early Childhood, 2014, 2016).

Play is a dynamic process with multiple definitions that emphasize active engagement in activities that are often spontaneous, intrinsically motivated, and pleasurable or fun (Allee-Herndon, 2019; Paes & Eberhart, 2019; Zosh et al., 2018). Experts agree that play contributes to the growth and development of children in cognitive, social and emotional, physical, and communication domains (Frost et al., 2012; Hassinger-Das et al., 2019; Singer, 2006; Sluss, 2019; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006;). Where do we begin to effectively support play for children with special needs?

Inclusion of All Children

Creating an inclusive classroom climate by welcoming all children regardless of their abilities enhances a community of learners (Gronlund & Rendon, 2017). Children practice making friends, helping one another, and respecting individual differences. Teachers learn about each child and their family members to identify strengths, attention and activity levels, play preferences, and special interests (Division for Early Childhood, 2016). Teachers are mindful that children represent diverse cultures and have a range of prior experiences, which may possibly include chronic stress and trauma. In addition, many children are dual-language learners. Consequently, teachers must draw upon cultural competence by valuing diversity, supporting home languages, and



managing children's challenging behaviors (Gronlund & Rendon, 2017; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019). Often, this will require intentional planning and targeted interventions by teachers.

The Role of the Teacher in Child-directed Play

Child-directed play may be referred to as free play or discovery play. Children use creativity, pretense, and symbolic representation to make sense of their world (Moore & Zweig, 2021; Sluss, 2019). Child-directed play provides opportunities for children to initiate exploration, to manipulate play props and re-arrange loose parts, and to practice persistence. The teacher's role is an active one by addressing the needs of each child. Preparing the environment, arranging the space, selecting appropriate learning materials, and providing ample time in the daily schedule takes intentional planning. It is important to provide open-ended, appealing materials

in adequate quantities to offer choices to children. Next, the teacher observes children's engagement in play by staying nearby, watching, listening, and interacting to support inclusion. The wise teacher knows when to intervene on behalf of a child with special needs. The following are some examples.

- A child who wanders, unable to decide on a play activity.
- A child who appears confused or frustrated.
- A child who is unable to enter a play group because they lack the language or social skills to interact and communicate with others.
- A child who is struggling to interact effectively with peers due to lack of vocabulary, lack of self-regulation to manage strong emotions, or limited experiences to participate in imaginary situations.

How to intervene will be determined by the needs of the child and the specific situation. A teacher might play alongside a child who is indecisive. Modeling how to use play materials will assist a child who is confused or frustrated by intervening before the child resorts to withdrawal or aggression. Scaffolding can also be provided by selecting a more competent peer as a play partner for a reluctant or disengaged child. Offering suggestions with words or materials can assist a child who struggles with a limited vocabulary or strong emotions. Provocations and challenges may be necessary for the child who has little experience with pretending. Familiar items from the child's home and culture will invite more imaginative play. Finally, children can benefit from reflecting about their play by recalling play activities with stories, re-enactments, drawings, and captioned photographs (Jones & Reynolds, 2011).

Child-directed or free play in a classroom or on the playground allows children to determine when, with whom, and where to play (Frost et al., 2012). However, children with disabilities are more likely to be socially neglected. They may be impulsive, argumentative, or overly aggressive, resulting in rejection by their peers. Lack of social skills may interfere with the development of friendships that are critically important to children's development (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020). Teacher intervention is often necessary to promote successful peer-to-peer interactions. The teacher serves as a mediator to keep children emotionally and physically safe. Clarifying or interpreting the words and intentions of a child with special needs can pave the way for more positive interactions. A child might need assistance to join a play partner or to enter group



play. As a co-player, the teacher can model prosocial behaviors such as taking turns and cooperating with others. Through social play, children learn to express emotions, recognize the perspectives of others, and demonstrate empathy. As children gain social competence and a sense of belonging, the need for interventions will be gradually reduced (Moore & Zweig, 2021).

The Role of the Teacher in Guided Play

Guided play involves activities that are structured by adults and focused on learning goals derived from early childhood education standards or developmental milestones. Guided play in which children are actively engaged is considered play-based learning (Gronlund & Rendon, 2017; Masterson & Bohart, 2019; Moore & Zweig, 2021). Teachers provide guidance by introducing new concepts, asking questions, modeling vocabulary, extending the learning, and providing prompts for problem solving (Hassing-er-Das et al., 2019; McDonald, 2019; Paes & Eberhart, 2019).

It takes intentional planning to design developmentally and culturally appropriate themes of study with connections to early learning standards. Promoting access and full inclusion of children with special needs requires knowing each child individually and preparing adjustments, adaptations, and/or accommodations. Guided play can support the curiosity, initiative, persistence, attention and engagement, problem solving, and creative thinking of young learners through provocations and challenges (Masterson & Bohart, 2019; Mraz et al., 2016). Using observations and assessments, teachers can address the ongoing needs of each child.

Guided play can be incorporated into every aspect of the early childhood curriculum. Children can be exposed to rich content through playful approaches in language and literacy, mathe-

matics, science, social studies, the arts, and motor development (Gronlund & Rendon, 2017; Masterson & Bohart, 2019; Mraz et al., 2016; Parks, 2015) Opportunities for play-based learning can extend from the classroom to the outdoors.

Teachers may need to adjust the classroom arrangement to allow easy access for children with walkers or wheelchairs. A quiet place where a child can self-isolate provides a welcome respite for a child who becomes overwhelmed by the noise and clutter of a shared space. Concerns about both physical and emotional safety of all children should take priority. Teaching a problem-solving approach to conflict resolution will enable children with different abilities to learn empathy, appropriate expressions for emotions, self-regulation, and skills of collaboration.

A knowledgeable teacher will be ready with adaptations of learning activities for children with varied practical and academic skills. Center times or workshops can be lengthened when children are focused and deeply engaged in projects. Circle times or whole group activities can be curtailed when children's interests wane and wiggle breaks are needed. Adaptations to promote full participation may include pairing a child with a more competent peer, a buddy system to manage routines, and more frequent individual or small group sessions. A flexible teacher can assess learning by encouraging multiple ways for children to demonstrate what they learned. Progress of each child can be monitored by documenting play activities with words and pictures, preparing anecdotal records, using checklists, and collecting work samples.

Accommodations will be determined by legal mandates to provide the least restrictive environment for each child with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Assistive technology that promotes access to toys and materials, improves mobility, or supports a child's communications will ensure access and full participation by children with special needs (Kirk et al., 2015). Ideally, playgrounds should meet guidelines for accessible play areas that have been tested for stability and safety (United States Access Board, 2007).

A successful strategy for implementing guided play involves the Plan-Do-Review Process, originally prescribed by the High/Scope curriculum for preschoolers (Weikart, 2004). The teacher organizes the play environment, provides props and play materials, schedules time, sets ground rules, and observes and interacts with individuals or groups of children to extend the play. Children are partners in learning and active participants in each stage of the process. The Plan-Do-Review Process provides a framework for guiding the play of children with and without special needs.

In the *Planning* stage, the teacher briefly introduces new options or reminds children of the choices of activities that are available. In the classroom, these might include puzzles and manipulatives, a small group science experiment, creative arts activities, music and movement with scarves, and dramatic play. In the outdoors, choices might include circle games, climbing equipment, chalk drawing, and play with balls. Each child states their intention to participate and moves to the specified area. The teacher records children's verbal responses or a system for children to record their own choices with a planning board or computer may be instituted. Children with limited language skills may point to an area of the room or playground, or otherwise indicate their intentions nonverbally. As children become accustomed to planning, they will develop more detailed plans about how they will use materials and what goals they intend to accomplish.

During the *Doing* stage, children are actively engaged with materials and may interact freely with co-players. The Teacher allots enough time for children to follow through on their plans. In addition, the teacher carefully observes the children and converses with them about their activities, offering ideas for extensions and facilitating problem solving, as needed. Children with short attention spans or who may be easily distracted might need support from the teacher to follow or change their plans.

During the *Reviewing* stage, a guided discussion encourages each child to reflect on what was accomplished or discovered. Children often focus on what worked and what they might change in the future. The reflective process promotes thinking about the play, using language to describe what was done, evaluating the outcomes, and anticipating plans for another day. The teacher respectfully asks questions to gain the child's perspectives, not to quiz the child on curriculum content. Children's efforts are acknowledged and celebrated by all.

Recapturing Play through Advocacy

We can recapture play by advocating for the rights to play experiences for all children. There are several professional organizations that recognize and promote the importance of play in chil-

Table 1 Examples of Agencies and Foundations that Promote Play

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alliance for Childhood, https://allianceforchildhood.org • Childhood Education International, https://ceinternational1892.org/ • Council for Exceptional Children, https://exceptionalchildren.org/ • Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, https://www.dec-spec.org • Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, https://ectacenter.org/ • Federation for Children with Special Needs, https://fcsn.org/ • International Play Association-USA, https://ipausa.org/ • National Association for the Education of Young Children, https://naeyc.org • National Inclusion Project, https://www.inclusionproject/lets-all-play • Office of Special Education Programs, https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osep/index.html • Southern Early Childhood Association, https://www.seca.info/

dren's development. Resources are also available from various agencies and foundations. **Table 1** includes some examples of organizations that advocate for play for all children.

We hope that these suggestions will serve as inspiration for your work with young children. Let's join together to ensure that children with special needs can experience the joys and benefits of play!

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as Teacher Educator of the Year, and Who's Who Among America's Teachers. Dr. Moore is a strong advocate for children's and adults' rights to play.

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ucation with students in the Early Childhood Educator Program. She teaches undergraduates in observation and assessment, theories of development, early childhood curriculum, education practices, child development associate training, special education, abuse and neglect, and leadership, Dr Zweig's expertise is in Early Childhood Education, Child Development, Elementary Education, Special Education, Training Teachers, Parenting, Parent Involvement, Children with Special Needs and Families, Guidance, Child Abuse, Supervision and Administration, Educational Leadership. She has presented over 50 workshops at local, state and national training conferences to showcase early childhood trends and teacher education. She has authored and co-authored four textbooks and has reviewed 25 books, articles and technical reports. Dr. Zweig serves on a number of Executive Boards. Among them are the Texas Workforce Commission, University and College Advisory Boards, and Region 10 Early Head Start and Head Start Advisory Boards. Additional awards include Teacher of the Year, Professor of the Year, Outstanding Trainer of the Year, Texas Teacher Educator of the Year, Early Childhood Visionary of the Year, and Who's Who Among America's Teachers. Dr. Zweig is a strong supporter of the power of positive thinking in the workplace. She believes that children develop a sense of self and learn to make sense of the world around them through play.

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