In this sixth edition of *Play at the Center of the Curriculum*, we reaffirm our commitment to play in the early childhood classroom. This is an important time and opportunity for informed innovations in the way we educate young children. And early childhood is an important time in the lives of our future citizens. The stakes are enormous.

Today, children have fewer opportunities to play in schools and communities. At the same time, the natural link between play and development is becoming increasingly recognized. This is a time to reconcile early childhood education practices with developmental theory, research, and the wisdom of practitioners. Developmental theory shows that play is critical to the development of intelligence, personality, competencies, a sense of self, and social awareness. Research evidence shows that play supports learning across all domains of children’s development.

Therefore, we believe that a developmentally appropriate, holistic, and integrated early childhood curriculum has play at its center. We demonstrate how play can be drawn on to improve developmentally based early childhood education. We propose that play is a critical dimension to children’s learning and development throughout the preschool, kindergarten, and primary-grade years.

We believe that an ideal early childhood classroom is characterized by an abundance of play. Our experience tells us that teachers can learn to structure the early childhood classroom environment and to sequence classroom routines so that the learning expectations for children are embedded in spontaneous and guided play activity.

It has always been important that educators assure the community that its youth will receive the necessary abilities and skills to be productive citizens. In many schools, the articulation of academic expectations and standards represents an attempt to meet this responsibility. In this edition, we pay particular attention to demonstrating how developmentally appropriate standards can be met in a play-centered curriculum.

... [A]lmost all children can play well ... [P]lay teaches children how to be sociable and channels cognitive development ... These capacities serve people lifelong once they go to work (Sennet, 2008, p. 268).

*Play at the Center of the Curriculum* carefully blends theory and practice. As seasoned teachers, we demonstrate how to draw both the methods and the content of a successful curriculum from children’s play. We interweave vignettes of children’s play, theories of play and development, and instructional strategies and guidelines that place play at the center of the curriculum.

By combining sound theory and research with practical illustrations, *Play at the Center of the Curriculum* achieves a solid argument for play. Teachers and students in
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the field of early childhood education will find this book to be a valuable resource. This is not merely a “how-to” book, nor is it simply a “thought” book. Rather, it is a blending of each, serving the reader in a number of ways.

*Play at the Center of the Curriculum* is a resource for those who want to engage children in a developmental zone where children and teachers are learning from and with each other. Current and future teachers are guided in methods of supporting children’s progress through play. The teacher becomes the architect of the learning environment, using play and development as the blueprint.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

- This sixth edition is updated to include discussions of current topics in early childhood education that relate to play in early childhood practice and policy. New vignettes from classrooms link current best practices with theory and empirical research. Scores of new resources are cited throughout.
- The new chapter feature *Family Diversity* illustrates the many ways that the play-centered curriculum provides an inclusive, welcoming program for all children and families. We expand our emphasis on diversity in this new edition. Chapters provide more discussion and examples of how educators build on the children’s strengths and meet the needs of children with special needs as well as children from diverse backgrounds and cultures, including children who are dual language learners.
- Each chapter has been organized with new pedagogical features to enhance students’ learning: *Learning Outcomes, Summaries,* and *Applying Your Knowledge.* Chapters begin with a list of key learning outcomes to give readers an overview of the focus of the chapter. Chapter summaries highlight key concepts and review main points. The feature *Applying Your Knowledge* concludes each chapter so readers can assess their understandings of key concepts and consider practical applications in programs for young children.
- This sixth edition introduces the new focus on *advocating for play.* Early childhood professionals are advocates for play practices and policies that benefit children. In the first chapter we describe the many ways that early childhood educators and students can become informed advocates for play at multiple levels, from daily acts of advocacy with children, families, and colleagues to working together to affect public policy. Several chapters throughout the text include a new feature called *Advocacy in Action.* Case studies and vignettes portray teachers advocating for play as they develop environments and experiences for children’s play, promote families’ understanding of the importance of play, and advocate successfully for policies that make a difference in children’s lives. The last chapter concludes with resources that educators can use to advocate for play with links to online resources.
The mathematics and science chapters (Chapters 7 and 9, respectively) have been thoroughly revised and reorganized based on current frameworks and standards. Core concepts and processes are included. The science chapter reflects the inclusion of engineering and technology in the science framework and standards. We underscore that engineering and technology are important dimensions of traditional early childhood programs that provide opportunities for children’s constructive play.

There is increased emphasis on promoting children’s health, well-being, and safety. The revised chapter on outdoor play (Chapter 12) features numerous practical strategies and resources for teachers and further emphasizes the contributions of outdoor play to children’s healthy development and growth. We include an expanded section that clearly defines rough and tumble play and discusses its importance in development. The revised chapter on toys and technology (Chapter 13) considers the benefits and risks of new media technology and recommends guidelines for using screen technology in ways that support children’s health, well-being, and developing competencies.

ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

This text has been written for students with varying experience and knowledge. Chapters 1 through 6 are designed to form foundational concepts and principles. We recommend that these be read first.

Chapter 1 presents a rationale and framework for play at the center of a balanced, developmentally based curriculum. Numerous examples illustrate how teachers balance spontaneous and guided play with teacher-planned activities to support children’s learning and meet program expectations.

Chapters 2 and 3 introduce theory and research that support our understanding of play and development. The reader is introduced to the ideas of major figures in developmental theory—Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, and Mead—as well as to the work of contemporary researchers. We provide perspectives on how play supports the development of children’s symbolic thought, language and literacy, logical–mathematical thinking, problem solving, imagination, and creativity.

Chapters 4 and 5 bring this developmental focus back to the reality of the classroom. We explore the teacher’s role in setting the stage, actively guiding, and orchestrating play. These chapters show the many factors regarding intervention strategies, environments, materials, and timing that educators consider in program implementation. The issue of how teachers might respond to violent and aggressive play is addressed through vignettes and practical strategies.

Chapter 6 looks at the many ways that play can be used to assess children’s developmental progress and describes play-centered approaches to authentic assessment. Included are many examples of play that embed state and national curriculum standards.

Chapters 7 through 11 explore curriculum areas that are of interest to contemporary early childhood education: mathematics, language and literacy, science,
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the arts, and socialization. Each content area chapter begins with a vignette that focuses on how the curriculum is embedded in the children’s spontaneous play. The chapters describe how spontaneous and guided play provide balance to teacher-planned activities. The reader will find a rich palette of practical ideas for the articulation of the play-centered curriculum. Throughout these chapters, we discuss how teachers respond to the challenge of our ever-more ethnically and culturally diverse classrooms as well as meeting expectations and standards in a developmentally appropriate manner.

Chapter 12 advocates for the importance of outdoor play to promote children’s health and well-being. Outdoor play involves children in physical activity, engagement with nature, as well as opportunities for self-initiated play and inquiry. The place for children’s rough and tumble play in school settings is discussed extensively. This chapter presents best practices in planning, observing, interpreting, and assessing young children’s outdoor play.

The chapters on science and outdoor play develop the text’s emphasis on the importance of developing children’s connection with nature and the environment. New curriculum has been added to the art chapter foregrounding novel ways to enhance children’s engagement with natural materials.

Chapter 13 looks at ways in which play, toys, and media technology interact to affect the young child’s life. We present many ideas and observations useful to teachers and families on the roles of toys and games. We recommend guidelines for the use of media technology to support children’s health and developing competencies.

Depending on the background of students, instructors can vary the order of these chapters and draw on some of the suggested resources to extend students’ understanding. Chapters 7 through 13 can be assigned in an order that is compatible with the instructor’s course structure.

Chapter 14 extends understandings of developmental theory and play, expanding on the constructivist views presented by Piaget and Vygotsky in Chapters 2 and 3. The role of play in developing intelligence, personality, competency, and sense of self is explored. We pay particular attention to the role of work and autonomy in the early childhood years as they relate to the broader goals of education. This chapter will be more meaningful after reading the more experience-focused chapters that have preceded it.

KEY FEATURES OF THIS TEXT

Appropriate Practice for All Children: An Integrated Approach
An inclusive, play-based curriculum recognizes the individual and cultural differences of all children not as “add-ons” but as an integral way to enrich the curriculum. Play-centered curricula build on the strengths as well as the challenges of children with special needs. Throughout this book we discuss how a play-centered
curriculum incorporates children’s diverse heritages, cultures, languages, and family backgrounds.

**Vignettes**
Each chapter anchors its focus in the world of children by beginning with a vignette related to play and education. Numerous additional classroom vignettes are provided throughout each chapter. These practical observations ground the reader in day-to-day educational experiences.

**Learning Outcomes, Summary, and Applying Your Knowledge**
Each chapter begins with a list of the most important learning outcomes to give readers an overview of the focus of the chapter. Chapter summaries highlight key concepts and review main points. The feature Applying Your Knowledge concludes each chapter so readers can assess their understandings of key concepts and consider practical applications in programs for young children.

**Play Advocacy**
In this text we emphasize advocacy as a dimension of professional practice. Chapter sections and special features on play advocacy support readers in becoming informed and effective advocates for play. We recognize multiple ways that early childhood educators advocate for play in schools and communities as well as at the state and national levels. Teachers promote play through “daily acts of advocacy” by maintaining nurturing, appropriate environments and experiences for children as they learn and grow. They advocate for play as they show families and colleagues how play supports children’s development and learning. Early childhood educators work together as informed, persistent advocates for public policies that promote play and benefit children. Case studies of successful play advocacy efforts empower future teachers to participate in a community of change. Recommended books, resources, and links to professional organizations that promote play advocacy are included.

**INSTRUCTOR RESOURCES**

**Online Instructor’s Resource Manual**
This manual is written for instructors teaching courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. It includes suggested approaches for using this text as well as chapter-by-chapter guides, ideas for projects—both in and out of class—and suggested resources for further study.

**Online Test Bank**
The Test Bank includes a variety of test items, including essay, multiple-choice, and short-answer questions.
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CHAPTER 1

Looking at Play Through Teachers’ Eyes
Chapter 1

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Write a rationale for placing play at the center of the early childhood curriculum.
- Describe a model and important considerations for implementing a play-centered curriculum. Define spontaneous play, guided play, and teacher-directed play.
- Summarize the main points discussed by each of four teachers who were interviewed.
- Explain how the NAEYC’s position on developmentally appropriate practice relates to spontaneous or guided play.
- Discuss challenges and opportunities related to the development and implementation of standards for young children’s learning and development.
- Explain why the teacher’s role is critical to the quality of a play-centered curriculum.
- Describe several things teachers can do to become more informed advocates for play.

With dramatic gestures, Brandon loudly sings, “Can you milk my cow?” After he and his kindergarten classmates finish the song with a rousing, “Yes, ma’am!” their teacher, Anna, calls on Becky and Tino to figure out the date and count the number of days the children have been to school. (This is the 26th day.) As other children join in the counting, Brandon takes a toy car out of his pocket. He spins the wheels, turns around, and shows it to Chris. After a moment, he reaches out to touch Kara’s shoelaces, whispering, “I have snaps.” Then he opens and refastens the Velcro snaps on his shoes.

Anna announces that it’s choice time and calls on children to leave the circle and go to the activities of their choice. Brandon sits up straight, wanting to be called on and ready to start. The moment his name is called, he heads to the housekeeping area, where Chris and Andy are opening some cupboards. Brandon announces: “I’ll make breakfast.” (He picks up the coffeepot.) “Here’s coffee.” (He pretends to pour a cup and gives it to Chris.)

Mary, a new student in the class, wanders into the housekeeping area holding the pet rat. Brandon interrupts his breakfast preparation and says to Mary, “You can’t bring Fluffy in here. You have to keep her near her cage.”

Within a few minutes, the theme of the children’s play turns from eating to firefighting. Brandon and Andy go to the block area to get some long block “hoses.” They spend a few minutes there pretending to hose down several block construction “fires.” Brandon knocks one down, to the angry cries of the builders, Valerie and Paul. He then transforms the block hose into a gun, which he uses to shoot at them.

As he and Andy stomp about the block area, Brandon passes Mary, still holding the rat, and says to her, “That’s too tight. See, like this.” He takes
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the rat from her, cradles it, looks it in the eyes, and pats it. “Fluffy was at my house during vacation. I got to feed her. See, she remembers me.”

Brandon, Andy, and Mary spend the next 10 minutes building a house and a maze for Fluffy. Brandon has chosen to play in the block area each day for more than a month. The children gather five arches for a roof, partially covering a rectangular enclosure they have made by stacking blocks horizontally using long blocks and, when none are left, two shorter blocks placed side by side.

After building the “roof,” Brandon rushes to a nearby table, where Rotha and Kai are chatting and drawing. He grabs a piece of paper and hastily scribbles on the middle of it, knocking off a few templates and scissors in the process. “This is my map. This is my map for the maze,” he says. Brandon then goes to his teacher for some tape to put on the maze. He points to a figure on the paper where two lines intersect and says, “See my X? That’s where Fluffy gets out.”

Every observation of children’s play illustrates its multidimensional qualities. By observing Brandon’s play for just a short time, we can learn about the way he is developing socially. For example, we see that Brandon is able to join Chris and Andy in their play in the housekeeping area by introducing an appropriate topic, offering to make breakfast. This observation also informs us about Brandon’s developing cognitive abilities. In his play, he uses a block to symbolically represent first a hose and then a gun. While building the house for Fluffy, Brandon demonstrates practical knowledge of mathematical equivalencies when he uses two short blocks to equal the length of one longer block. By observing Brandon’s play, we witness how he applies his developing abilities in real situations.

This observation also raises some of the many questions that teachers ask about children’s play. How should a teacher respond when a child plays during group instruction? How can a teacher balance children’s spontaneous play with more teacher-planned activities? Should teachers redirect children when they select the same play materials or themes day after day? Should gun play be allowed? How can play help us understand and assess children’s cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical development? How can we be sure we are creating an inclusive curriculum that promotes equity and school success for all? How can a play-centered curriculum address mandated frameworks and standards?

Observing Brandon leads us to the central issue this book addresses: Why should play be at the center of the curriculum in early childhood programs?

PLAY AT THE CENTER OF A DEVELOPMENTALLY BASED CURRICULUM

What is the specific rationale for making play the center of the curriculum? The premise of this book is that play-based early childhood programs place the developmental characteristics of the young child—the learner—at the center of the
Chapter 1

curriculum. This book draws on evidence that play is a fundamental activity of early childhood and a central force in young children’s development. During early childhood, play is essential and drives young children’s development.

The Power of Play in Development

As we describe in the chapters that follow, play is simultaneously a facet of development and the source of energy for development. Play is an expression of the child’s developing personality, sense of self, intellect, social capacity, and physicality. At the same time, through their play children direct their energy toward activities of their own choice, which stimulate further development.

Play is essential for optimal development and learning in young children. The match between the characteristics of play and the characteristics of the young child provides a synergy that drives development as no teacher-directed activity can.

However, a play-centered curriculum is not a laissez-faire curriculum in which anything goes. It is a curriculum that uses the power of play to foster children’s development. Play fosters all aspects of young children’s development from birth through age 8: emotional, social, intellectual, linguistic, and physical. It involves the integration of what children have learned. It is a curriculum in which teachers take an active role in balancing spontaneous play, guided play, teacher-directed play, and teacher-planned activities. Play-centered curricula support children’s development and learning in all settings and contexts, both indoors and outside.

In honoring the child’s play, we honor the “whole child.” We think of the child as a developing “whole” human being in whom the processes of development are integrated. This view contrasts with the ideas that early childhood development involves the linear acquisition of separate skills or that kindergarten and primary-grade children have outgrown the developmental benefits of rich play experiences. These views are not supported by research.

In promoting a play-centered curriculum, we make short- and long-term investments in children’s development. In the short term, play creates a classroom atmosphere of cooperation, initiative, and intellectual challenge. If we look at long-term consequences, we find that play supports children’s growth in broad, inclusive competencies such as self-direction and industry. These are competencies valued by both parents and educators, and ones that children will need to develop to function as adults in our society.

Throughout this book, we emphasize how curricula in particular areas such as mathematics, language and literacy, science, art, socialization, and technology support and enrich young children’s play. This idea contrasts with the widespread notion that play serves merely to support subject-matter competencies. Our view also contrasts with the idea of play traditionally found in the intermediate grades—play as a reward for finishing work.

This does not mean that all play is equal in our eyes. Play is fun, but it is more than fun. Play-centered curricula are not opportunities for teachers to stand aside, but require highly competent, involved, and purposeful teachers. The critical dimension
is to provide conditions that foster children’s development using their own sources of energy. In the following chapters we articulate how a play-based curriculum supports children’s own developmental forces.

**Play as a Fundamental Human Activity**

Play is a human phenomenon that occurs across the life span and across cultures. Parents in Mexico teach their babies the clapping game “tortillas,” while older children and adults play Loteria. South Asian adolescents play soccer, while younger children play hopping games accompanied by singing. Chinese toddlers clap to a verse celebrating their grandmothers, “banging the gong merrily to accompany me home,” while the grandmothers, in their old age, play mahjong. As humans, we not only enjoy our own engagement in play but are also fascinated with the play of others. The entertainment and sports industries reflect the popularity of observing others at play.

**Grounding Practice in Theory, Research, and the Wisdom of Practitioners**

The idea of play at the center of the early childhood curriculum is grounded in work from four early childhood traditions: (a) early childhood practitioners, (b) theorists and researchers who study play, (c) researchers and theorists in the field of development and learning, and (d) educational historians. These four traditions inform our ideas of play-based practice.

**Play and the Wisdom of Practitioners** Historically, play has been at the center of early childhood programs. A kindergarten student playing with blocks might spend
an hour focused intently on this task, but might squirm when asked to sit down for 10 minutes to practice writing letters of the alphabet. Early childhood educators have observed and emphasized that young children bring an energy and enthusiasm to their play that not only seems to drive development, but also seems to be an inseparable part of development (e.g., Paley, 2004, 2010).

**The Characteristics of Play**  Theorists who study play suggest possible reasons for its importance in the development of young children when they describe the characteristics of play. According to theorists, play is characterized by one or more of these features: (a) active engagement, (b) intrinsic motivation, (c) attention to means rather than ends, (d) nonliteral behavior, and (e) freedom from external rules.

When young children are actively engaged, we observe their zest and their focused attention. Adults often marvel at children’s unwillingness to be distracted from play that interests them. Brandon, for example, shows his genuine desire to be doing what he does, without encouragement from Anna. This is what we mean by **intrinsic motivation**—the desire to engage in an activity arises from within the child. When children are actively engaged and intrinsically motivated, they demonstrate their abilities to use language to communicate with others, solve problems, draw, run and climb, and so on. Children’s sense of autonomy, initiative, and industry are rooted in intrinsic motivation and active engagement.

When children pay attention to means rather than ends, we notice that they are less involved with achieving a goal or outcome than with the activity itself and the enjoyment of it. Young children are well aware of the grown-up things they cannot yet do. Even the competencies that are expected of them are often frustrating, such as waiting for a snack, sharing, cutting with scissors, and (in the primary years) learning to read, add and subtract, and carry out simple household chores. In contrast, in their play, children can change the goals and the ways to achieve the goals.

We often sense children’s exhilaration as we observe them shifting means and goals as they figure out new ways to solve problems. These open-ended explorations involve opportunities for creative thinking that are lacking in curricula designed for children to arrive at a single, “correct” response (Monighan-Nourot, Scales, Van Hoorn, with Almy, 1987).

Young children’s play is often nonliteral pretend play that is not bound by external rules. How is such fantasy play useful to a young child who is learning to function in the real world? Children’s symbolic development is fostered through the creation and use of symbols in pretend play as well as in hypothetical, “as if” situations. Through play, children develop boundaries of the real and the imagined and also visions of the possible—the drive that turns the wheels of invention.

**Practice, Research, and Theory**  Early childhood educators have always been guided by theory and research in psychology, anthropology, and sociology as well as education. Support for placing play at the center of the curriculum comes from the work of theorists and researchers from many disciplines who examine the role of play in development and learning.
Looking at Play Through Teachers’ Eyes

For more than a century, theorists have explored these links. Their theories and writings reflect the time in which these theorists lived. Therefore, we discuss these theories from current viewpoints that reflect today’s concerns and understandings of development. In the chapters that follow, we turn to the work of Piaget and Vygotsky for understanding the importance of play in cognitive development. We turn to Erikson and Mead to understand the role of play in the child’s developing sense of self and ability to establish social relationships, and to Vygotsky and Erikson to understand how play might reflect issues of culture and society.

In the 21st century, we find research on young children’s play is flourishing. Thirty years ago, there were comparatively few books on children’s play, and searches of journals turned up few articles. In the first edition of this text, published in 1993, we pointed out that the literature in the field of children’s play had been growing. As we review the research for this sixth edition, we find that empirical research and writing in the field of young children’s play is burgeoning—there are hundreds of recent articles in international journals and scores of recent books (e.g., Cohen & Waite-Stupiansky, 2011; Elkind, 2007; Fromberg & Bergen, 2006; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009). In addition, throughout this edition we discuss recent critical thinking that addresses challenges in early childhood education to promote inclusive, multicultural, and peaceful classrooms (e.g., Falk, 2012; Fennimore & Goodwin, 2011; Levin, 2003, 2013).

Play and Traditions of Schooling   Writings on the history of schooling also lead us to place play at the center of the early childhood education curriculum. Historians have examined issues such as “What is worth learning?” and, importantly, “Who should learn?” as well as the ways in which formal schools differ from informal apprenticeship structures found in less industrialized, traditional societies (Dewey, 1915).

Early schools in the Middle East and Europe evolved with specific purposes and expectations, such as training scribes who could write official documents. Only select groups of boys attended school during middle childhood and adolescence. Later, as formal schools spread geographically, the reasons for schooling as well as the expectations of what should be learned changed. Several centuries ago, schools often prepared students for particular professions. The number of students attending schools began to grow, and the diversity of students began to increase. The rationale and expectations for schooling continued to change.

During the late 1800s, a greater number of adults needed to have basic competencies in numeracy and literacy, whereas a more elite group of adults needed more technical competencies. It was also during this period and the early 1900s that girls and boys younger than 7 or 8 years of age entered “school-like” settings. For the children of factory workers, these settings were child-care institutions designed to keep children out of harm’s way. In contrast, for the children from more affluent families, the settings were nursery schools and kindergarten classes that aimed to support the development of the child. Play comprised a large part of these programs.

By the mid-1950s, the gradual blending of the goals of child care, preschool, kindergarten, and the primary grades frequently led to increased pressure for highly
structured curricula and programs that stressed “academic” skills (Nourot, 2005). Trends in the history of formal schooling as well as current practices lead us to articulate our position that play should be at the center of the early childhood curriculum.

PLAY AT THE CENTER OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM: A MODEL FOR PRACTICE

We consider this a pivotal moment for early childhood educators. We cannot continue educational practices that are failing so many of our youngest students. Young children have fewer rich opportunities for play not only in schools but also at homes and community settings, both indoors and out.

This is also a time rich in possibilities. Researchers and practitioners are learning more about the central role of play in all interrelated facets of development: social–emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and physical. The evidence-based early childhood literature demonstrates the important role of play. This is the time to place play at the center of the curriculum and reconcile program practices with the wisdom of practitioners, theorists, and research.

Play-centered programs promote equity because they are built around the strengths of young children rather than their weaknesses. To meet the needs of all children, we recommend preschool–kindergarten programs that are firmly play centered yet complemented by daily life activities and some teacher-directed activities. We see first and second grades as transitional years, with play and daily life activities complemented with increased time for teacher-planned activities. In the primary grades, play and work are merged into increasingly complex and extended projects, further integrating play and areas of academic learning.

In our view, education for children from preschool through the primary grades should promote the development of both the competent young child and the competent future adult. This is best accomplished by means of a balanced, play-centered program in which neither spontaneous play nor teacher-planned activities are the only mode. As Figure 1.1 illustrates, play is at the center of a balanced curriculum.

In the play-centered curricula described throughout this book, a constant flow occurs among these three strata. We show how children repeat daily life and teacher-directed activities in their play, how teachers plan daily life activities so that they draw on the power of play, how teachers can develop effective assessment strategies, and how teachers integrate children’s play into the curriculum. We illustrate how daily life activities include preschoolers setting the table, kindergartners planting a garden, first graders writing and mailing their first letters, and second graders learning to tell time. We examine how teacher-planned activities include projects and thematic units as well as subject area units.

In contrast to the common emphasis on instrumental play (that is, play used to support subject-matter objectives), we emphasize how curricula in content areas can enrich and support good play. By changing our focus from play to daily life activities to
teacher-planned activities (and always back to play), our view becomes the opposite of the traditional view. When children play, they are intrinsically motivated and engrossed in what interests them most. They are also practicing and developing competencies at the edge of their potential. In play, self-directed learning engages and focuses attention and provides numerous opportunities for all children to develop self-regulation and to practice self-control.

When children are involved in such daily life activities as writing a letter, sending an e-mail message, cleaning up, or learning to tie their shoes, they are engaged in what is important in the lives of the adults around them. The purpose of daily life activities is readily apparent. There are procedures to learn and social rules to obey. This is not necessarily true of play. For example, when a child like Brandon pretends to make coffee for breakfast, he does not have to adhere to the sequence of how an adult makes coffee. He can choose to turn the cup of coffee into a glass of orange juice or a cup of ice cream if he wants to. Play also has rules, but children have more power to determine them.

Children’s involvement in play, daily life activities, and teacher-planned activities differs when we compare the rationale for children’s activity. Children play because of their own intrinsic interests. In play, no “one task” is imposed on the child by adults. The child does not need to use a sense of will or purposeful intention to meet adult expectations. A sense of will is needed to accomplish tasks or daily life activities that are not of one’s choosing. This is self-regulation. Unless teacher-planned activities are developmentally attuned to the children’s level, it is difficult for the children to adhere to the task. Prior to middle childhood, most children have difficulty maintaining sufficient willpower to learn such adult competencies as reading or writing.
During middle childhood, children become increasingly interested in and able to master daily life competencies. Historically, children living in more traditional cultures, as well as those attending formal school, were 7 or 8 years old—the beginning of middle childhood—before such tasks were expected of them. This remains true today in many countries where educators wait until children are 7 or 8 years old before introducing formal reading or mathematics lessons. Until middle childhood, the emphasis is on creating programs rich in opportunities for the informal development of subject-matter competencies.

The Play Continuum

In early childhood settings, play is frequently described as “spontaneous,” “guided,” or teacher directed. Rather than considering them as different categories, we use these terms to highlight the most characteristic feature of the play.

- **Spontaneous play** refers to behaviors that arise from intrinsic motivation, that are self-directed, and that represent expressions of children’s own interests and desires.

  Four-year-olds Grace and Sophia stroll over to the maple trees at the border of the yard. It’s late October, and leaves cover the ground. Sophia kicks at the leaves. When Grace begins to pick them up, Sophia joins her. The children spend several minutes gathering the red, orange, and gold leaves. Sophia drops one, and they watch it flutter to the ground. They scatter the leaves, then pick up more. As a large golden leaf twirls to the ground, Grace exclaims gleefully: “They’re helicopters!”

  The characteristics of play are most visible in spontaneous play. This vignette reflects all of these characteristics: intrinsic motivation, active engagement, attention to means rather than ends, freedom from external rules, and nonliteral behavior.

- **Guided play** refers to children’s play that is influenced in an intentional manner by adults. As an educational term, to guide means to influence someone’s thinking or activity. In this example, the children are actively engaged. Though they choose to participate, Roseann both initiates and guides their activity.

  Five kindergartners gather around the large table, constructing a collage that represents the ocean and hilly shoreline. Roseann, their teacher, makes a simple sketch on butcher paper and sets out colored paper and a collection of small objects, including dried flowers, feathers, and shells. She also puts out sheets of brightly colored construction paper, scissors, and glue sticks. She anticipates that the children will create collages using these materials as well as others that are always available on a nearby shelf. As she plans the activity and selects materials, Roseann keeps in mind that Logan, a child with attention deficit disorder, loves to glue and paste materials that are bright and tactile. Logan carefully
selects several opalescent shells and pastes them onto a wave. Roseann notices that Jayden has been observing Logan for several minutes. He hesitates as he examines the materials, moving his hand across a few of the shells. Quietly, Roseann leans toward him and asks: “Which shell do you want to paste first?”

Teacher-directed play refers to children’s play that is organized and, literally, directed or controlled by an adult, such as singing a song. Teachers’ intentions are clear and specific, even when expressed in a soft tone or even when several choices are provided. Despite the teacher’s instructions or directions, the characteristic of the activity may still be defined as play. Inasmuch as the activity is goal directed by adults, it is guided or directed play rather than spontaneous play. The following is a clear example of directed play:

It looks like all the children in the second-grade class that Molly teaches are giggling. So is Molly and Mrs. Kim, Yae Suk’s mother. Last week Mrs. Kim made chop chae with the children and provided chopsticks. Though several children ate the clear rice noodles, vegetables, and beans with ease, most children—and Molly—found it challenging. After class, Mrs. Kim had volunteered to return to teach the children to use Korean-style chopsticks, which are thinner and shorter than most. Today she’s returned with dried kidney beans. Molly sets up individual trays so the beans don’t fly across the room. Mrs. Kim shows the children how to hold the chopsticks and pick up beans one at a time. She demonstrates, picking up one, then two at a time, then three. What a challenge for hand–eye and small muscle coordination. Though only a few children use the chopsticks with ease, all the children are attentive and involved. Ethan finds that he can pick up one at a time, then two at a time, then three at a time! Others are fascinated with his skill. Mrs. Kim starts chanting: “hana, dhul, seht” (one, two, three) as Ethan picks up one, then two, then three beans at a time. Pretty soon everyone is chanting, “hana, dhul, seht,” and starts giggling.

The concepts of spontaneous play, guided play, and teacher-directed play may first appear to distinguish three separate domains of play. However, we conceptualize them as occurring along a continuum that goes from play that children initiate to play that teachers initiate, as shown in Figure 1.2.
In practice, these three contexts rarely remain separate. For example, we often see how children integrate mathematical aspects of their daily lives in their spontaneous play. Likewise, teachers often plan activities to extend children’s understandings of these very same concepts. Observations of early childhood programs show that play generates teacher-planned activities and, conversely, that teacher-planned activities frequently lead to play.

Throughout this book, we emphasize that the balance among the three types of play—spontaneous play, guided play, and teacher-directed play—depends on many factors, such as the developmental level and interests of the children, the cultures of the families, and the culture of the school. Early childhood educators balance play with appropriate teacher-directed strategies as they address the needs of all children. For example, an older first grader who continues to struggle with letter–sound relationships or basic number concepts may need both more direct adult-guided instruction as well as more opportunities to integrate developing understandings within the context of spontaneous play.

Children’s school curricula must be viewed in the context of their lives. The child who goes from child care to school to an evening at home watching TV has a different need for play than the child who attends nursery school 2 days per week and plays outside most of the time.

**HOW TEACHERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN VIEW PLAY**

In the following discussion, we return to the vignette of Brandon and the interview with his teacher, Anna. We also draw from interviews with other preschool and primary teachers who spoke about their implementation of a play-centered curriculum.

**Play Through the Eyes of Brandon’s Teacher**

Brandon’s teacher, Anna, uses her observations of his play to gain insight into his growth and development:

Play gives Brandon opportunities to select activities of his own choosing. I am learning a lot about Brandon by watching him play. He tends to visit several areas during this 30- to 40-minute period, but I’ve noticed that he often sustains a dramatic theme such as firefighting for a fairly long time or returns to the same theme at several points during the day. He shows much more focused attention during this time than he does when I’m presenting a more structured lesson, like today, for example, in circle time when I introduced counting skills.

He’s definitely one of the more verbal children in our group. His social skills are improving, and he often demonstrates a caring attitude toward the other children. I noticed he was also very nurturing toward Fluffy today. He loves to help care for her. I feel this is a wonderful opportunity for him to
develop his sense of responsibility, though he has been a bit possessive about her since he took her home. He’s really attached to her. He’s interested in learning more about rats and brought in a book from the library and copied a picture. Choice time gives him and the other children more of a chance to develop their individual interests.

He generally gets along with the other children, but he can be aggressive at times—for instance, when he knocked down someone’s blocks. This year he rarely gets into direct physical confrontations as he did last year in preschool. I’ve been keeping observational records of this, and it seems that these aggressive acts tend to happen when he’s rushed or has too many people around him. Today’s episode involving using the blocks as guns certainly raised my classic question about war play: “Should I stop it?” I’m often uncertain about what to do, especially when it is such a momentary theme as it was today.

Anna continues:

Along with my written records, I’ve been trying to decide what else to include in his portfolio. Today I thought about keeping the map. He was so eager to take it home that I decided to make a copy of it to save.

I’m experimenting a lot with play. It’s been a gradual process. Observing the children’s behavior, I feel that I’m on the right track. It’s hard to believe how different my program is from the way it was only 3 or 4 years ago. I had a desk for each child and all of my “inside” time was teacher directed, either whole-class activities or centers. My program is definitely play centered. I include materials that foster literacy, math, art, and social development, including some materials that I use in more directed activities. Now we have worktables and a lot more open space. The first thing I did was order blocks. We haven’t had blocks in a kindergarten at this school for as long as I’ve been here and that’s 12 years. The kindergarten teacher who has been here the longest said that her old set of blocks was probably still in a district storehouse somewhere.

I also expanded the housekeeping area. In the beginning, I had a very small one, but I never really thought about it as more than a special area where kids could go when they were finished with something else. Now I see how important the playhouse is. I have had a lot of fun making it more attractive to the children who are immigrants. I included more photos of their families, pictures from ethnic calendars showing places and people from different cultures, dolls with ethnically diverse clothing, and objects the children are familiar with from their own backgrounds, like rice bowls and chopsticks. The children seem to feel more at home in my classroom and can play out what they know.

Anyway, I think my kids are a lot more creative and thoughtful than when my program was more teacher dominated. For example, I see this in their stories and journals. Half of the students who were in my class last year are in
Kristin’s class now. She told me last week that she noticed a difference. The children who were in my class are particularly eager to initiate projects, and they tend to stay engrossed longer. She also sees a difference in the way they cooperate with everyone, not just their good friends, and the way they respect each others’ work.

Anna mentioned that Sarah’s mother noticed a difference, too. Several years ago, Anna followed a very structured reading program with prereaders and work-sheets. This year the children began their own journals on the first day of school. She put pads of paper and pencils in many places in the classroom to encourage writing. Although Anna still attends to teaching phonemic awareness, she now uses a greater repertoire of strategies.

Sarah’s mother told Anna that she was very happy that Anna was finally teaching reading. Indeed, Sarah was reading and writing a lot at home as well. Anna remarked that Sarah’s sister was in her class 5 years ago when she was only following formal reading lessons and having her students work in workbooks. Anna realized that this story of the two sisters didn’t conclusively prove the point, but she thought that in general her students were now much more self-directed in reading and writing. Anna pointed out that during what she calls choice time (which she used to call play time), probably a third of the children are reading or writing at any given moment.

In this brief conversation, Brandon’s teacher mentions issues vital to the play-centered curriculum—issues that we examine throughout this book. She discusses the development of her program in terms of carefully observing children to understand their interests and development. She uses written observations and photos of play as part of her assessment program and puts play-created products, such as Brandon’s map, in her students’ portfolios. Anna reflects carefully on the effects of her interventions in children’s play, questioning, for example, “what to do about war play” and “how to help immigrant children feel more comfortable in the classroom.” She also experiments with curricular ideas such as using play to support emerging literacy and conceptual mathematics development.

Across the country, preschool and primary teachers continue to examine the role of play in their programs. Teachers are trying to make programs more empowering for all—that is, embracing the full range of diversity of children and their families and meeting the developmental needs of children. As we wrote this sixth edition of this book, we visited and spoke to the teachers and administrators at numerous schools to observe the variety of current practices and understandings about children’s play. We highlight teacher conversations from Brandon’s school purposely because the preschool, kindergarten, and primary-grade teachers at that school represent a broad spectrum, from those who follow teacher-directed, skill-based programs to teachers who implement play-centered curricula, such as Randi, Pat, and Kristin. Our conversations with these teachers exemplify some of the typical yet important ideas and concerns educators raise as they implement more play-centered curricula.
Looking at Play Through Teachers’ Eyes

Randi, a preschool teacher, emphasizes the role of play in meeting the social and emotional needs of individual children. Pat, a kindergarten teacher, raises the question, “What is good play?” and the issue of assessment. Kristin, a first-grade teacher in her second year of teaching, focuses on the importance of choice in children’s development. She also discusses how the play curriculum challenges students to use their developing academic skills in a comfortable environment.

**Randi: Meeting the Needs of Individual Children in Preschool**

I think that play gives children a chance to make their own choices, their own decisions. The chances it provides for socialization also are very important. As they play, children communicate their feelings and ideas. This is especially important in my program, where almost all my children have special needs. For many, English is a second language. Play gives them a chance to express themselves in a less formal and more comfortable situation than circle time, for example. Play also provides opportunities for children to use their own language fluently and to express ideas in nonverbal ways. It’s important for developing their sense of self-worth.

Among the questions I have are “Am I doing the best I can for my students who are learning English as a second language?” It’s hard for me when I can’t follow the dialogue of their dramatic play. When I think about children like Brandon, I find I have questions about how to handle aggressive play.

**Pat: From Worksheets and Desks to Blocks and Bubbles in Kindergarten**

I consider play anything children decide to do that’s not adult directed, like reading by themselves. If the choice is theirs, logically, they should enjoy it. Play gives young children the time to develop language skills, get along with their peers, make choices, and be responsible. It gives me the chance to learn more about the children, see what they do, and discover what they’re really interested in doing. It also gives me time to interact with each child personally.

What I want to happen, what I consider “good play,” depends on the child. Yesterday, I observed Marissa in what I consider good play for her. Marissa always seems to follow the other children. Yesterday, however, she was playing by herself with a small playhouse. She had selected what she herself wanted to do. She talked to herself a lot and stayed focused. This is a new behavior for her: selecting her own activity and staying with it.

I’ve made a commitment to write observations. I need to learn more about what to look for when I’m observing. Also, I want to ask questions to find out what children are really thinking, so they can respond without thinking “What’s the right answer?” I feel as though I’m at a new stage in learning how to intervene.
Kristin: Letting Children Develop at Their Own Pace in First Grade

During free-choice time, my children have access to blocks, Legos and other manipulatives, art materials like paint and markers, and the housekeeping corner. It’s also a time when they can dictate a story to me or a parent volunteer, or get some help from their peers in inventing the spelling of words.

I think kids need to have time to work on concepts they are developing at their own pace and by their own choice. Right now, there’s a lot of writing going on. Some write letters. Others write whole sentences. In language, as in other areas, there is a wide range of abilities. During free-choice time, children work at a level that’s comfortable for them. During the past year, I’ve extended the amount of play time I provide. Now I plan for at least 30 to 40 minutes a day, usually in the early afternoon. When they’ve had enough time to make their own choices about learning, the children are much more able to focus on the social studies or science activities scheduled at the end of the day.

Another goal of mine is to discuss my program effectively with parents. Play has never been a traditional part of first-grade curriculum in our area. Parents often ask me whether we really have time to play if we are to get the children ready for second grade.

During our visits to schools, we listened to the questions about play, children’s development, education practices, and state standards. These visits were fun because teachers shared so many stories, and they were impressive because teachers revealed insights and raised issues. In this book we address these issues and share stories from

The child’s development is tied to social life.
Looking at Play Through Teachers’ Eyes

some of the teachers we talked to, as well as stories of our own. We create bridges between practice, research, and theory that deal with play in a playful way.

PLAY AND DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE

Some teachers with whom we spoke told us that their program consists mainly of play—spontaneous, guided, as well as teacher-directed play. Others, like Kristin, are experimenting with including more play in the curriculum. Some teachers are wondering if play is appropriate, and if so what kinds and how much. All are trying to answer questions about the role of play in meeting the needs of the children they teach.

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is the term used by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) to describe programs grounded in child development theory and research and designed to meet the developmental needs of children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The NAEYC’s most recent publication and the organization’s position statement, Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs: Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8, places greater emphasis on the centrality of play in development and learning. Copple and Bredekamp explain that this most recent position statement reflects current knowledge from research and recognition of the importance of the broader social context, including the context of children’s lives. The 2009 statement reflects one of the core values of early childhood educators: recognition that childhood is both a time for learning and for “laughter, love, play, and great fun” (p. x).

Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition, and social competence. . . . High-level dramatic play produces documented cognitive, social and emotional benefits. However, with children spending more time in adult-directed activities and media use, forms of child play characterized by imagination and rich social interactions seem to be declining. . . . Rather than detracting from academic learning, play appears to support the abilities that underlie such learning and thus to promote school success. (pp. 14, 15)

Most of the teachers we talked to take these development and learning needs into account with regard to how their teaching practices meet the needs of diverse children and families. For example, in discussing her program, Rosemarie considers both typical development of 3- and 4-year-olds, as well as the particular needs of children who are dual language learners. Neil thinks about the needs of 6- and 7-year-olds, including the individual needs of children such as Robert, identified as having learning disabilities that affect his working memory. A play-centered curriculum provides the integrative context essential to support the growth of the whole child, particularly through the preschool years and during the primary grades. The feature below, Family Diversity: Building Upon Children’s Experiences to Promote Learning, shows how children draw upon their experiences and backgrounds in their play as they build new friendships and solve problems.
FAMILY DIVERSITY
Building Upon Children’s Experiences to Promote Learning

Lisa and Peter are working in the “post office,” wrapping packages and sending them “to the Philippines.”

Lisa: “Do we have enough paper to wrap this package (three books)? They’re for my Grandma Venecia from Cebu.” Peter picks up two sheets of newspaper.

Peter: “We’re going to have to tape these together. Wait, here’s the tape. I’ll hold this.” They tape the two sheets together by cutting and sticking two short pieces of tape horizontally from one newspaper sheet to the other. They then try to cut a long piece, but the tape gets twisted. Lisa cuts four short pieces and tapes the paper together.

Lisa: “OK, put the books down here.” They wrap the books, trying to make the package smooth around the edges, a difficult task because the books are not the same size. “This is going to be expensive! I bet it weighs a ton.”

They put the package on a scale that has numbers to indicate ounces as well as a teacher-made, nonstandard measurement chart with three different colors indicating three different degrees of heaviness.

Peter: “See. It’s green. That’s heavy. It’s going to be three dollars!” He takes the star stamps and pad and stamps three green stars at the top left of the package. “Wait. You need to put her address on it.” Lisa picks up a thin blue marker and slowly writes GRUM VNSESSA 632 SEEBOO. Then she carefully selects a thick red marker and draws a heart with a butterfly to the left of the address.

In this episode, Lisa initiates a play theme that connects her relationship with her beloved grandmother to her new classmates and school. At the beginning of the year, Lisa spoke comfortably and fluently with her family members in her native Visayan but was hesitant to speak English with the other children. Lisa’s play informs us about her dramatic gains in speaking English, including mastery of the language as shown by increases in sentence length and complexity as well as vocabulary. She is now comfortable initiating and developing conversations in English with her peers.

Lisa and Peter demonstrate that they know some basic information about the applications of mathematics to everyday situations. They know that one weighs a package before sending it, and they have some beginning understandings of the concept of weight. Both Lisa and Peter demonstrate that they understand that the weight of the package relates to the price of mailing it. Lisa also demonstrates that she is aware that numerals are used to write an address. Lisa and Peter are also learning about geometry and spatial relationships when they estimate how much paper they need to wrap their parcel. At the post office, they are able to take information about weight, prices, addresses, and area; coordinate the information; and apply it.

As we watch Lisa and Peter, we notice that they are able to sustain their cooperative play for more than 20 minutes. During this time, they encounter several problems. For example, Peter notices that one piece of paper is not large enough to wrap the package. Lisa solves the problem with the tape. Each time, one or the other or both come up with a solution that the other accepts. Their play is complex, cooperative, imaginative, and joyful.
ADDRESSING STANDARDS IN THE PLAY-CENTERED CURRICULUM

What do we hope children will gain from participating in early childhood programs? Early childhood educators know that the early years are critical for development. Therefore, we have high expectations for our programs and for ourselves as educators as well as for each child in our care. How do early childhood educators determine expectations about students’ development, dispositions, and learning? How do we make decisions about curricula to benefit all children and support all domains of their development?

Throughout the history of early childhood education and care, there have been different and sometimes competing expectations for young children’s development and learning, different views about curricula, and different ways of assessing students’ progress and achievement (Almy, 1975).

Meisels (2011) uses the metaphor of a road map when discussing Common Core State Standards. From an education perspective, the terms expectations, standards, and benchmarks are used to refer to the destination; we need to know our destination so that we can make decisions about the route and know how far we have to go and when we get there. The curriculum we implement is the route that children will take to get to the destination, and assessments provide evidence of where the students are along the route and when they have arrived (that is, “Are we there yet?”).

Meisels’s metaphor underscores the obvious need to link standards, curriculum, and assessment. Standards are attempts to answer the question, “What should students learn and when should they learn it?” The metaphor also helps us put today’s controversies in historical perspective and understand the different perspectives of current standards held by various stakeholders, educators, families, professional educational organizations, and policymakers.

Early childhood educators who implement a play-centered curriculum work in varied settings. In some programs, teachers determine the expectations or benchmarks for student learning that they decide are appropriate for the children in their program. They then plan curricular activities and assessments based on these expectations. Educators in other programs are required to develop a program curriculum and assessment tools that address standards or expectations adopted by the state governments. In general, preschool educators follow some form of early learning standards. Educators who work with children in grades K–2 consider the K–12 Common Core State Standards for English language arts and mathematics in addition to their state’s Early Learning Standards. Programs such as Head Start and HighScope have their own nationwide standards.

As early childhood educators who are advocates for young children, we need to be informed about standards whatever our personal perspective and whether or not we are mandated to implement standards. Therefore, in this book we discuss critical issues relating to the development and implementation of developmentally appropriate standards. In the chapters that follow we include vignettes that show how teachers address standards in a play-centered curriculum.
Principles for Developing Appropriate Standards for Young Children

The standards movement has roots in different philosophies of education and different political perspectives. Although the standards movement had a growing effect on K–12 programs beginning in the 1980s, it was not until 2000 that many national associations and state departments of education considered standards for preschool and kindergarten children. The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act and initiatives to develop standards for young children led to efforts to ensure that standards would benefit young children. In the joint 2002 position paper, “Early Learning Standards: Creating the Conditions for Success,” the NAEYC and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE, 2002) discuss issues relating to the development and implementation of standards for young children. (All NAEYC position statements may be found at the NAEYC website, www.naeyc.org.) This key statement posits that early learning standards can lead to high-quality educational experiences that benefit young children, but only when the following four conditions are implemented:

1. The content and outcomes of early learning standards are developmentally appropriate to children’s current developmental abilities as well as their life situations and experiences. (See pp. 4–5.)

2. Numerous stakeholders are engaged in developing and reviewing early childhood standards. Stakeholders include parents and other community representatives and early childhood educators, including early childhood special education specialists. (See p. 6.)

3. “Early learning standards gain their effectiveness through implementation and assessment practices that support all children’s development in ethical, appropriate ways” (p. 6). This means that teaching practices promote social interactions and curricula promote engagement and depth of explorations. “Tools for assessing young children’s progress must be clearly connected to important learning represented in the standards; must be technically, developmentally, and culturally valid; and must yield comprehensive, useful information.” (p. 7).

4. Standards are accompanied by strong support for early childhood programs, including adequate support for professionals and professional development, and respectful support for families as partners in their children’s education. (See pp. 7–8.)

Identifying the Most Important Early Learning Standards For more than a decade, the NAEYC has worked with other national education associations to identify the “big ideas” and important processes that are developmentally appropriate for young children. Many national educational associations developed K–12 academic subject-oriented frameworks and standards. These include the International Reading Association (IRA), the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM),
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the Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA), the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE), and the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE).

The NAEYC has issued joint position papers with the International Reading Association as well as with the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Both underscore the importance of curricula that provide children with numerous opportunities to revisit these big ideas and processes—in their spontaneous play as well as in more teacher-directed activities. The statements endorse the four NAEYC conditions summarized above for the development and implementation of early learning standards. Content standards for children in preschool through primary grades must be meaningful and encourage children’s active, engaged experiences. Standards should build upon children’s prior experiences in their homes and communities as well as school. Standards should lead to more inclusive curricula that meet children’s special needs and reflect the cultures and languages of children and their families. The NAEYC position papers support the type of curricula that we advocate throughout this book: in-depth, engaging curricula that provide children with opportunities to revisit these big ideas and processes—in child-initiated play as well as in more teacher-planned activities.

The Development and Implementation of Standards: Challenges and Possibilities

In the years since 2002, the adoption and implementation of K–12 and early learning standards led to widespread discussion within the early childhood education community. In our discussions with early childhood educators we have found that the concerns they raised often related to the NAEYC’s four principles. For example, educators are concerned that standards do not reflect an adequate understanding of the integrated processes that characterize young children’s development and learning as well as cultural and individual differences. Many teachers feel that they are being pushed toward more teacher-directed instruction and toward a curriculum with a narrow focus on English language arts and math.

Educators are deeply concerned that assessments they are required to use are often developmentally inappropriate, particularly the use of “high-stakes testing” to make “high-stakes” decisions, such as telling parents that their child is not ready for first grade. In fact, the NAEYC and NAEC/SDE joint position statement Early Learning Standards: Creating the Conditions for Success (2002) emphasizes that “such misuses of standards-related assessments violate professional codes of ethical conduct” (p. 7).

Among early childhood educators and researchers, the level of concern was heightened with the 2010 Common Core State Standards Initiative that included K–12 English language arts and mathematics. The stated purpose is to provide consistent expectations for learning in all 50 states and ensure that high school graduates succeed in college and in the workplace. In principle, Common Core State Standards were to be developed and implemented based on empirical evidence. Standards
should identify what learning is most important and lead to students’ attainment of higher-level cognitive abilities.

In a timely 2010 joint statement, the NAEYC and NAECS/SDE expressed concerns that the Common Core State Standards might lead to unintended consequences such as narrowing the scope of early childhood curriculum with its focus on the development of the whole child. Since 2010 there have been numerous critical analyses and responses to the Common Core State Standards that focus on the lack of empirical research as a base for the development and implementation process and the assessment methods that are used (e.g., Meisels, 2011; Miller & Carlsson-Paige, 2013). One of the most outspoken critics of Common Core State Standards is Diane Ravitch, former U.S. assistant secretary of education from 1991 to 1993 and one of the initial architects of the standards movement. For example, she points out that “(t)hey are being imposed on the children of this nation despite the fact that no one has any idea how they will affect students, teachers, or schools” (2013, n.p.).


As of 2013, the Common Core State Standards for mathematics and English language arts had been adopted by almost all 50 states, and in that same year the Next Generation Science Standards for K–12 were released for adoption. Increasingly, states have become engaged in plans to implement standards and the critical challenge of aligning curriculum and assessment.

The NAEYC’s 2012 report The Common Core State Standards: Caution and Opportunity for Early Childhood Education was written to inform early childhood educators about the possible impacts of standards. The NAEYC’s caution refers to “aspects of the Common Core that might pose threats to early childhood education” (p. 2). The NAEYC’s discussion of opportunity points out that this is a critical time for early childhood educators to participate in state and local implementation processes. The NAEYC bases its analysis on the four necessary conditions for success identified in Early Learning Standards: Creating the Conditions for Success (NAECS/SDE, 2002). The 2012 report provides a systematic review of all four conditions and presents the NAEYC’s serious concerns about each. The discussion of the third condition is particularly relevant to a balanced play-centered curriculum:

Early learning standards gain their effectiveness through implementation and assessment practices that support children’s development in ethical, appropriate ways. . . . Especially critical is maintaining methods of instruction that include a range of approaches—including the use of play as well as both small- and large-group instruction—that are considered to be developmentally appropriate for young children. (NAEYC, 2012a, n.p.)

We recommend that all those concerned with the education of young children read the entire NAEYC report as well as the “Joint Statement of Early Childhood Health and Education Professions on the Common Core Initiative” (Alliance for
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Childhood, 2013). It is only through such careful analysis that teachers can advocate for appropriate policies that foster a balanced, integrated curriculum that uses the power of play. This is the approach that we take throughout this book to support all teachers working to implement a play-centered curriculum.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF THE TEACHER

If play is at the center of the early childhood curriculum, how is the curriculum developed? The play-centered curriculum is a constantly evolving emergent curriculum. The teacher is the key to the play-centered curriculum. The knowledgeable teacher uses a wide repertoire of techniques to carefully orchestrate the flow from spontaneous play to guided and directed play to more subject-oriented instruction and back to play. This flow is in tune with and arises from the developmental needs of individual children in the class.

How might a teacher foster literacy, mathematical thinking, artistic expression, socialization, self-esteem, scientific thinking, and other concepts, dispositions, and skills valued in early education? How might a teacher address standards in an integrated and meaningful way? Let’s look at an example:

Scott introduced himself as a “third-grade teacher just promoted to kindergarten.” This was the first year that he had tried to “incorporate any play . . . much less make play the major part of my program.” With little opportunity to visit other programs, Scott started the year feeling that he was sinking as much as he was swimming. “In my sinking mode, I went for teacher-structured activities as life rafts. They felt safe. They were like the curriculum I knew.”

A play-centered curriculum supports physical development.
Chapter 1

It took Scott most of the year to set up an environment where his students could have choices and sustained time to play through activities. Scott needed to read enough to convince himself that play was truly the cornerstone of development for young children. Then he could begin to make changes based on that conviction.

He concluded: “This has become the most intellectually challenging year for me. I am learning how to plan for play and how to use play to assess students’ growth. I like the concept of an evolving curriculum, but it takes patience as well as creativity to work it out each day. Things don’t always work out as I had imagined.”

“Because I’m an experienced teacher, I sometimes feel that I should be able to do this right away. But it doesn’t work out that way. It involves a major shift in the way I’m thinking as well as in the way I structure the program: a paradigm shift.”

Scott also mentioned how he felt at times when his colleagues from the “upper grades” come into his classroom. “I know they’re thinking that I’m ‘just’ playing. I’m finally feeling that I can defend what I do, explain why play is so important.”

“I’ve been joking that I want to ‘up play’ rather than ‘down play’ play! I want to show parents how it benefits their children. We had our first open house last week. I put together a Power Point with slides from last year and some slides from the first 2 weeks of school. It made a great difference for parents to see ‘live’ examples of how play is important. As I discussed the development of self-esteem, I showed several slides of Jimmy and Andrea building a tower taller than they are. (I wish I had had a video camera for that.)

The slides also gave me a chance to talk about play and social development. I purposely selected slides that included every student in my class so parents could get a personal message about how important play is to their own child’s social development.

Of course, I also emphasized the ways in which children use what they’ve learned in academic areas and how much more they learn through play. I showed slides of the children building with blocks, pouring and measuring as they played ‘making chili’ at the sand table, and talked about their development of math concepts. I used slides of children writing in their journals, others scribbling on the chalkboard, and one reading to another as I talked about literacy development. The slides helped parents make the connections between play and their children’s development in all areas.

I worked out a way to illustrate developmental progress. Four wonderful slides—if I may say so—show how Genette’s block constructions became more complex over a 2-month period last year. 🌟

As the examples throughout this book illustrate, a play-centered curriculum is orchestrated carefully by the teacher. It is not a step-by-step, teacher-proof didactic curriculum. Consequently, this is not a step-by-step curriculum guide. However,
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the play-centered curriculum we discuss is also very different from laissez-faire approaches to play such as recess time at many schools in which no one observes or intervenes. A play-centered curriculum involves teachers in careful planning and preparation, both inside and outside the classroom. A play-centered curriculum needs playful teachers who enjoy being spontaneous, involved, and creative as well as reflective and analytical.

In From Play to Practice: Connecting Teachers’ Play to Children’s Learning, authors Nell and Drew (2013) describe play workshops in which teachers play with engaging materials. Through joyful and creative experiences, teachers gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of a curriculum that has play at its center. Informed teachers who value play encourage playful and creative dispositions by being playful and imaginative themselves as they develop the curriculum.

ADVOCATING FOR PLAY

Advocate (verb). Origin: from the Latin advocare (to summon).

People frequently think about being an advocate in a formal sense. The word advocate is used to describe formal roles in legislative and judicial proceedings. We hear the term used to describe high-level and highly public advocacy—for example, a national spokesperson before a crowd of reporters. Indeed, early childhood educators do advocate for play in highly public and publicized ways. But this is only a small part of the continuum of advocacy efforts.

The Advocacy Continuum

Advocate (verb). Definition: to support, promote, recommend

Consider the many ways that early childhood educators advocate for play. Educators learn from and support each other in recognizing personal and public “daily acts of advocacy.” There is a broad range or continuum of advocacy efforts, including advocacy at the interpersonal level, the program or school level, the community level, as well as the state, national, and international levels. In the vignettes in this chapter, we see each teacher promoting play. Sometimes it’s a conversation we have with a co-teacher about promoting children’s outdoor play. Advocacy might involve joining neighbors to urge the city to plant a shade tree in a local playground. Sometimes we advocate for play by sending a link to a video on play to another teacher across town, or by signing a statement circulated by a national play association, or by writing a letter to a newspaper or a response on a blog. Often we support play by keeping ourselves informed—and, always, by making sure we take the time to play!

Educators who implement a play-centered curriculum replay playful ideas for advocacy. We share and build on each other’s ideas. Scott’s ideas for an open house are not new, but he makes them his own and draws on his knowledge of the children and their families. What are some of the ways that he supports and promotes
Chaper 1

play? See what you find when you analyze these brief quotes from the vignette more closely. What does he do to make connections between play, joy, and learning more “real” to families?

. . . I put together a slide show with slides from last year and some slides from the first 2 weeks of school.

. . . The slides also gave me a chance to talk about play and social development. I purposely selected slides that included every student in my class so parents could get a personal message about how important play is to their own child’s social development.

. . . Of course, I also emphasized the ways in which children use what they’ve learned in academic areas and how much more they learn through play. I showed slides of the children building with blocks, pouring and measuring as they played “making chili” at the sand table, and talked about their development of math concepts. I used slides of children writing in their journals, others scribbling on the chalkboard, and one reading to another as I talked about literacy development. The slides helped parents make the connections between play and their children’s development in all areas.

. . . I worked out a way to illustrate developmental progress. Four wonderful slides—if I may say so—show how Genette’s block constructions became more complex over a 2-month period last year.

Becoming an Informed Advocate for Play

Throughout this book we advocate for the play-centered curriculum and for expanding all children’s opportunities to play in their communities. The purpose of this book is to help readers become informed professionals. In each chapter you’ll find examples of how teachers develop and advocate for play-centered programs as well as informative updated references.

Readers have varied backgrounds and experiences in working on behalf of children. Some of us are now more interested in or comfortable with working individually at the program level. Some of us prefer to participate in more public spheres. The following feature, Becoming an Informed Advocate for Play: A Toolkit for Play Advocacy, shows how to collect and develop the tools you need to become an effective and informed advocate for play.

Playing Around with Play

- Play! Play is a fundamental human activity. Put theory into practice. All of us know that adults as well as children need to play. As you read this book, put your knowledge about the importance of play into practice. Take time to play. Why is play important to you? How do you choose to play?

- What are your experiences and memories of play? Did you play as a child? Where did you play? What did you play and with whom? Create a virtual file
Looking at Play Through Teachers’ Eyes

Becoming an Informed Advocate for Play

**Advocacy in Action: A Toolkit for Play Advocacy**

“Start from where you are” is good advice when we think about becoming better advocates on behalf of young children. Whatever our experiences and the ways that we advocate for play, we need to be informed, persistent, professional, and committed.

In the past, our “toolkits” were portfolios or expandable files with resources on play and advocacy. There was so much stuff—so many fliers, catalogs, lists, handouts, and research and policy papers. We still recommend that your play toolkit include an actual portfolio or file box, but so many of our resources are now digital. That makes them easy to file and share—and sharing is advocacy.

A play toolkit for advocacy includes resources and information. It also includes the experiences and feelings that fuel our commitment and persistence. We become more informed advocates as we learn more about the role of play in children’s healthy development and learning. We maintain our energy and drive by valuing and enjoying play in children’s lives and in our own. We become more effective advocates by drawing upon our knowledge, our values, and our feelings when we advocate for play. The activities and resources below are some starters for a play toolkit for advocacy.

- Interview an older family member to find out what kinds of play or games were common or traditional in your family. Describe your family and cultural heritage of play. How might play reflect the area, background, culture, and language of your family?

- Create a play map. Print out a map and mark where the children and adults in your community play. Identify outdoor play space—safe open spaces, parks, and playgrounds. Identify what is private and what is public. Are there indoor play spaces such as children’s museums, recreational centers, and gyms? What does your community need to support play?

- Learn more about the work of early childhood educators and the ways in which they advocate for play. Visit a play-centered early childhood program and write a detailed 10–20 minute observation of children playing. Carry out an informal interview with a teacher to learn about the opportunities and challenges for implementing a play-centered curriculum in that setting. As you read this book and become more informed, continue your observations and discussions. In what ways are these teachers and your colleagues advocating for play?

**Resources for Informed Play Advocates: Getting Started**

We start with this partial list of books and early childhood organizations that we’ve referred to or cited in this chapter. Many more excellent resources are included throughout the chapters that follow.
Several Books About Play and Early Childhood


Some Organizations That Promote Play

The Alliance for Childhood is an advocacy organization of early childhood professionals that works to create conditions that foster young children’s development and learning. The Alliance has a number of initiatives that focus on play. Resources on play are free and include excellent videos as well as summaries of research and implications for policy. (See the Alliance for Childhood website, www.allianceforchildhood.org.)

The Association for the Study of Play (TASP) is an interdisciplinary organization concerned with research about and theories of play across ages and around the world. Members represent disciplines such as education, folklore, psychology, anthropology, recreation, and the arts. (See The Association for the Study of Play website, www.tasplay.org.)

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) publishes many resources to help teachers implement play in early childhood education programs, including the recent books *From Play to Practice* and *Beyond Remote-Controlled Childhood* (see above). The NAEYC journals *Young Children, Early Learning Research Quarterly*, and *Teaching Young Children* feature articles on many facets of children’s play. The Play, Policy, and Practice (PPP) Interest Forum is an active group of NAEYC members that sponsors programs and holds annual meetings at the NAEYC Conference. PPP addresses issues relating to practice, research, and current issues related to play and policy. (See the NAEYC website, www.naeyc.org.)

Expanding the Toolkit for Play Advocacy

This first chapter begins a conversation about advocacy for play. In the following weeks you’ll have many opportunities to expand your toolkit for play advocacy.
Looking at Play Through Teachers’ Eyes by including your own observations in schools and communities, information you gather from readings and discussions, and online resources you bookmark. We hope that, week by week, as you broaden the way you define advocacy, you’ll find more examples, add more resources to your toolkit, and find more opportunities for advocacy. Becoming an advocate takes time. Therefore, we conclude this advocacy discussion in the last chapter of this book with a focus on using tools and resources for effective play advocacy.

SUMMARY

■ **Play at the center of a developmentally based curriculum.** The rationale for placing play at the center of the curriculum is that the developmental characteristics of the young child—the learner—should be at the core of the curriculum. This book is based on the evidence that play is a basic activity of early childhood and a central force in young children’s development. Therefore, a developmentally based program is a play-centered program. Play is simultaneously a facet of development and a source of energy for development. Play is an expression of the child’s developing personality, sense of self, intellect, social capacity, and physicality. At the same time, through their play children direct their energy toward activities of their own choice. These activities stimulate further development.

■ A play-centered curriculum is grounded in four early childhood traditions: the wisdom of early childhood practitioners, research and theory about children’s play, research and theory in the area of development and learning, and the work of educational historians.

■ **Play at the center of early childhood curriculum: A model for practice.** Educators develop a curriculum that includes play, daily life activities, and teacher-directed activities. Play includes spontaneous play, guided play, and teacher-directed play. In practice, however, these are not separate categories. In the play-centered curriculum the balance changes depending on the children’s development and expectations for learning, interests, and strengths as well as their needs.

■ **How teachers of young children view play.** In this section of the chapter we drew from interviews with four teachers who reflected on multiple aspects of implementing a play-centered curriculum. Anna discussed how she changed the room arrangement and included materials that reflected children’s home cultures and fostered literacy, math, art, and social development. Randi, a preschool teacher, emphasized the role of play in meeting the social and emotional needs of individual children. Pat, a kindergarten teacher, discussed how the answer to the question “What is good play?” depends on the child or group of children. She also talked about assessment in a play-centered curriculum. Kristin, a first-grade teacher, focused on the importance of choices in children’s development and how play also challenges children to use their developing academic skills in a comfortable environment.
**Play and developmentally appropriate practice.** Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is the term used by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) to describe programs grounded in child development theory and research that are designed to meet the developmental needs of children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The NAEYC’s most recent publication and the organization’s position statement, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs: Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*, places greater emphasis on the centrality of play in development and learning. Copple and Bredekamp explain that this most recent position statement reflects current knowledge from research and a recognition of the importance of the broader social context, including the context of children’s lives. The 2009 statement reflects one of the core values of early childhood educators: recognition that childhood is both a time for learning and for “laughter, love, play, and great fun” (p. x).

**Addressing standards in the play-centered curriculum.** Current early learning and common core standards are attempts to answer the question “What should students learn and when should they learn it?” Many early childhood educators are required to address standards or expectations adopted by state governments and to link curricula and assessments to those standards. In this section of the chapter we discussed some of the main possibilities and key challenges relating to the development and implementation of early learning standards and common core standards.

**The critical role of the teacher.** We contend that the teacher is the key to the play-centered curriculum. This is a curriculum in constant development—an emergent, evolving curriculum. The knowledgeable teacher uses a wide repertoire of techniques to carefully orchestrate the flow from spontaneous play to guided and directed play to more subject-oriented instruction and back to play. This flow is in tune with and arises from the developmental needs of children in the program.

**Advocating for play.** Early childhood educators seek many avenues to advocate for play. The continuum of efforts includes advocacy at the interpersonal level, the program or school level, the community level, as well as the state, national, and international levels. We become more effective advocates by drawing upon our knowledge, values, and feelings when we advocate for play. This chapter recommended activities and listed resources for starting a toolkit for play advocacy.

**APPLYING YOUR KNOWLEDGE**

1. Write a rationale for placing play at the center of the early childhood curriculum.
   a. Illustrate with examples from a vignette in this chapter or your own observations.
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2. Describe a model for implementing a play-centered curriculum.
   a. Define spontaneous play, guided play, and teacher-directed play.
   b. Discuss two issues teachers consider when balancing play, daily life activities, and teacher-planned activities.

3. Summarize the main points discussed by each of four teachers who were interviewed.
   a. Interview a teacher at the preschool through second-grade level about his or her use of play in the curriculum.
   b. Write your own interview (of yourself) stating why you think play should be at the center of the curriculum.

4. Explain how the NAEYC’s position on developmentally appropriate practice relates to spontaneous or guided play.
   a. Read one of the references cited in this chapter and discuss how it contributes to your perspective on developmentally appropriate practice for young children.
   b. Observe a child with special needs at play in an early childhood setting. Relate your observations to the NAEYC’s position.

5. Discuss challenges and opportunities related to the development and implementation of standards for young children’s learning and development.
   a. Speak with two teachers who are implementing state early learning standards or common core standards about their perspectives on opportunities and challenges.
   b. Read and discuss one of the references about standards cited in this chapter. What further questions do you have?

6. Explain why the teacher’s role is critical to the quality of a play-centered curriculum.
   a. Refer to two vignettes in this chapter or several of your own observations.

7. Describe several things that teachers can do to become more informed advocates for play
   a. Add to your play toolkit by carrying out and reflecting on one of the activities described in the section “Playing Around with Play.”
   b. Add to your play toolkit by annotating the list of recommended books with descriptions from the publishers’ websites.
   c. Write plans for two advocacy actions that you could begin this semester.
CHAPTER 2

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

■ Describe the “nature–nurture” debate and your understanding of how a constructivist view contributes to that debate.

■ Explain the role of schemes and the dynamics of assimilation and accommodation in Jean Piaget’s theory of development.

■ Discuss your understanding of how social experience and play are central to Vygotsky’s theory of development.

■ Briefly describe George Mead’s three stages in child development (the play stage, the game stage, and the generalized other stage) and give examples of how each relates to children’s play.

■ Discuss Erik Erikson’s first four psychosocial stages and how children use play to support the strengths of each of these stages (trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry).

Five-year-old Sophie brings home a large painted butterfly with her own writing “B T R F Y” carefully drawn in the corner. Her parents approach her teacher, concerned that allowing her to spell words incorrectly will hinder her success when she begins kindergarten in the fall.

The children in Roseanna’s multiage primary class are deep into the third week of their project on restaurants. They’ve made paper and playdough pizzas, menus, uniforms for the waiters, and paper money for their transactions, and they have talked about a website for the restaurant. A group of children have finished making placemats and ads for the “Don’t Forget the Olives” Pizza Parlor and are contemplating adding sushi to the menu. The school principal questions the value of this play-centered project and how it encompasses the district’s academic standards.

What answers can teachers give to questions about play in the classroom? Perhaps the most frequently quoted clichés are, “Play is the child’s way of learning” or “Play is the child’s work.” But how does play contribute to development and learning? Is play related to work in some systematic manner, or is play simply evidence of the flights of fancy and freedom we associate with childhood?

To answer these and other questions we need to formulate our ideas about the nature of play and how it develops. Although other species engage in play, the range of play from motor play to pretend play to games with rules is a uniquely human capacity. The development of play through these stages forms the foundation for the development of intellect, creativity and imagination, a sense of self, and the capacity to interact with others in positive and morally sound ways. In this chapter and those that follow we discuss how play contributes to children’s development and to the
integration of physical, social–emotional, and cognitive competencies for the whole child. Many teachers find it challenging to explain the role of play in children’s development and its place in the classroom, so exploring developmental theory will help meet this challenge (Sherwood & Reifel, 2013; Smith & Gosso, 2010; Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2010; Wood, 2010; Broadhead & Wood, 2010; Howard, 2010; Jones & Reynolds, 2011; Kuschner, 2012).

While we focus primarily on the role of play in development, it is also important not to lose sight of that fact that play is a source of laughter and humor, of inventiveness and beauty. It allows us to entertain possibilities and to envision the future. It helps us persevere in our efforts and explore the full range of our emotions. It fosters the spontaneity and joy that make us truly human. Keeping this in mind, we invite you to consider how development itself contributes to play as an essential aspect of human existence.

In this chapter we look at major theories that address the development of play in childhood. In developing a theory of practice that is based in the daily lives of children and their teachers, we begin by discussing the more “classic” theorists in developmental psychology.

A CONSTRUCTIVIST VIEW OF PLAY AND DEVELOPMENT

Throughout history, people have tried to understand how humans develop from helpless infants to functional adults. In the West, this has given rise to the debate between “nature” and “nurture.” The “nature” argument proposes that the form of adult capacities is contained in the seed of the infant and only needs to be nourished. The “nurture” argument holds that the adult is formed through experience and that the form of the adult reflects this experience. Constructivism concerns the interaction between “nature” and “nurture.”

Constructivism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and is a belief that the developing child, in the context of the social and physical environment, explores and adapts to the environment by coping with everyday challenges. In addition, it recognizes the central role of play in young children’s development. In this chapter, we explore four “classic” constructivist theorists and look at how they help early childhood educators understand and support children’s development through the play-centered curriculum. These theorists are

- Jean Piaget (1896–1980)
- Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934)
- George Herbert Mead (1863–1931)
- Erik Erikson (1902–1994)

These theorists shared similar constructivist orientations. In fact, this similar orientation is reflected in the titles of their books: Mind, Self, and Society by Mead (1934), Childhood and Society by Erikson (1950/1985), Mind in Society by Vygotsky (published in English, 1978), and Sociological Studies, essays by Piaget (published in English, 1995). In many ways, the differences among their theories reflect the historical time...
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and place in which they lived and their interests, background, and professional education (Beck, 2013). Perhaps most important, the theories reflect the specific questions these theorists asked about how humans develop.

**PIAGET’S DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY AND PLAY**

Though Jean Piaget was primarily focused on intellectual development, his work addresses social, moral, linguistic, and emotional development as well. Piaget viewed the development of knowledge as a gradual process of restructuring earlier ways of knowing into more adequate and generalized ways of knowing. He showed that children progressed through a universal series of stages in the development of their intelligence. The first 2 years encompasses the sensorimotor period, which is divided into six stages. During this period the child’s understanding of the world is gradually constructed from a coordination of motor and sensory information, but the child lacks the representational capacity reflected in symbolic play and language.

The next major period is the preoperational period, which generally lasts between 2 and 7 years of age and is divided into three stages. The term preoperational refers to the lack of mental operations associated with logical thought. This period is sometimes called the preconceptual stage because children during this period are not able to form true concepts where classes and relations are reliably coordinated.

The third period is the concrete-operational period, which includes three stages generally lasting between 7 and 12 years of age. This period is marked by the development of what is typically recognized as rational and logically verifiable thought. However, thought is still tied to the appearances of reality and is closely tied to the characteristics of concrete objects.

This is followed by the formal operational period from early adolescence on and is divided into three stages. During this period, the child’s thought is gradually freed from concrete reality and takes on hypothetical-deductive properties. Later in his career, Piaget was less tied to a formal definition of the various stages.

Piaget’s theory places the child at the center of this construction with a heavy emphasis on the child’s spontaneous, autonomous activities (Mooney, 2000; Saunders & Bingham-Newman, 1984). In the early childhood years this is always linked to play, both alone and with peers.

In Piaget’s constructivist view, knowledge is not simply acquired by gathering information from the environment or copying the behavior of others, but is based on what the individual brings to each situation. The schemes or mental patterns that children have already constructed are modified and added to as children try to make sense of new experiences in light of what they already know.

Four-year-old Kim explains the word *invisible* to his friend Tony when the word comes up in a story read by a parent to the two boys. “It’s like you go inside *visible*, and then no one can see you when you’re in *visible*!” Kim asserts, and Tony nods his head in understanding. Kim bases his explanation on what he has experienced about not being seen in the game of hide and seek; if you hide inside something, then you can’t be seen. 


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According to Piaget, the means of organization is intelligent adaptation, where humans modify their means of interacting with the environment to fit their personal needs (see Piaget, 1962, 1963, 1947/2003).

Piaget proposed an interactive process between two aspects of adaptation that he called assimilation and accommodation. This interaction is the source of development and learning. In assimilation, new experiences are incorporated into and interpreted by existing structures of thought. Most important, elements of experiences are not simply added to the thoughts already there, like items tacked onto a grocery list. Instead, elements are transformed to fit into the structure or “template” of that individual’s thinking. An example is the assimilative pattern developed in playing with playdough or clay. Claylike substances can be pinched, patted, molded, and rolled using patterns from previous experiences:

What happens when Kaya encounters “oublek,” a substance made of cornstarch and water that has some of the properties of clay, but also some different ones? Perhaps she is surprised that the new material oozes through her fingers rather than molding into a form. Kaya’s efforts to accommodate to the differences that the new material offers cause a change in the assimilative structure that Kaya will apply to claylike substances in the future.

In Piaget’s theory, accommodation is a complement to assimilation. Accommodation allows the structure of our thinking to change in adapting to new experiences. Accommodation is the process through which new schemes or mental patterns for potential behavior are created—existing patterns are modified to incorporate new information. Accommodation allows us to meet challenges presented by the environment, such as resolving the cognitive surprise generated by playing with oublek when playdough was expected.

Assimilation allows us to make sense of our experiences in light of what we already know. It allows us to consolidate, generalize, and apply our current structures of thinking to new situations. Accommodation challenges us to change and adapt to new information.

According to Piaget, there is constant interaction between these processes that create alternating states of tension and balance concerning what “fits” into our schemes and what doesn’t fit. Awareness that a new idea or perception does not fit into our structure of thinking calls for a change in our mental models and results in the continuing development of thought. Through the interaction of assimilation and accommodation, children balance their internal states and meet their personal needs for intelligent adaptation.

In the early childhood years, assimilative and accommodative processes are constantly fluctuating. First, the mental patterns fit the new situation. Then new elements are introduced that contradict. Mental structures then change to accommodate these new elements. This process of construction and expansion marks the development of children’s early thinking from personal ideas and concepts about the way the world
works to more stable and predictable relationships between internal mental models and the external world that are coordinated with the views of others.

Because a young child’s understanding of the world is closely tied to immediate contexts and lacks the stability of adult thought, his or her behavior is largely governed by play, and reality is assimilated to the immediate needs and perspective of the child. Through play and assimilation, young children bend their view of reality to their own immediate needs and wants.

**Three Types of Knowledge**

Piaget outlined three major types of knowledge: physical, logical–mathematical, and social. In play, children develop all three. **Physical knowledge** derives from activities with objects that allow children to make generalizations about the physical properties of objects. For example, through physical manipulation in play, children may discover that rocks sink and corks float, blocks stacked too high may fall, and sand and water may be used to mold forms.

*Symbolic thought develops through make believe.*
Logical–mathematical knowledge is constructed as children reflect on the relationships between actions on objects, for instance by comparing the sizes of two balls or the relative lengths of blocks. In logical–mathematical knowledge, the concepts used by the child do not come from the objects themselves but from the relationship invented by the child. These two types of knowledge, physical and logical–mathematical, are constructed through the child’s own experiences, and play is critical to the development of both.

In contrast, social knowledge is knowledge imparted by other people and includes names for things as well as social conventions such as proper behavior at snack or group time. This type of knowledge falls closer to the accommodative end of the continuum, relying on imitation and memorization for its acquisition. However, social knowledge also depends on the mental structures created through logical–mathematical knowledge for its application. As Kamii (1982) pointed out, categories such as “good words” and “bad words” are derived from social experiences, but it is the logical–mathematical capacity for classification that enables children to decide when a word might meet with the disapproval of adults.

In practice, physical, logical–mathematical, and social knowledge are closely connected in any situation involving the education of young children, as we see in this example:

Four-year-old Enid helps Madeline, the assistant teacher, bring food to the snack table. “We need one cracker for each place,” Madeline coaches. Enid takes the crackers from the box, places one on each plate, and looks expectantly at her teacher. “There,” Madeline says. “Let’s count these together—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.” Enid counts with her teacher. “Now let’s count the crackers—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.” They count together again. Madeline asks, “How many cups will we need if we have one for every person?”

Enid carefully takes one cup at a time from the stack and places each next to a plate with a cracker on it. Two of the cups tip over as she sets them down, and as she replaces them upright, Enid looks intently at the uneven places in the tabletop that have pushed the empty cups off balance. She runs her hand over the table next to the remaining plates to find a smooth spot before she sets down the next cup.

Enid looks expectantly at Madeline, pointing her finger at the first cup. “1, 2, 3,” Enid begins, then hesitates. Madeline joins her by counting “4, 5, 6, 7,” and they finish the sequence of numbers. “Seven plates, seven crackers, and seven cups,” summarizes her teacher, and Enid beams at her accomplishment. “Would you like to ring the bell for snack?” Madeline asks. Enid nods and goes off to ring the bell.

In this example, we see Enid constructing physical knowledge about strategies for placing crackers and cups on the snack table. She learns something about balance on even and uneven surfaces. Enid also constructs logical–mathematical knowledge about the relationship of cups to surfaces and about one-to-one correspondence.
Madeline helps her count using one-to-one correspondence and presents the idea of equivalent sets for the seven plates, seven crackers, and seven cups. Madeline also helps her to learn social conventional knowledge about the names and sequence of numbers in English, as well as the position of cups in relation to plates. Enid uses her knowledge of the purpose of the snack bell to call her classmates to enjoy her handiwork. Teachers’ abilities to understand and support children’s learning depend on their skill in identifying the types of knowledge being constructed by the child and finding strategies to enhance that construction. Teachers are challenged to provide opportunities for children to construct their own learning and apply what they have learned from others through playful activity.

**Piaget: The Development of Play**

Piaget’s theory is intimately tied to the study of play. Many of his important works are filled with observations of his own three children at play during their first 2 years of life and of other children he observed in preschool settings in Geneva, Switzerland.

His important work, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (1962), made play a central part of his theory. He showed how children develop the ability to represent their world through a series of stages in which assimilation and accommodation are increasingly better coordinated with each other. Children’s ability to represent their inner concerns and understandings is revealed in their play, which progresses through a series of stages. As each new stage develops, it incorporates the possibilities for play of all the previous stages (Figure 2.1). In the following sections, we present a brief description of these stages.

**Practice or Functional Play**  The first stage is termed practice or functional play and is a major characteristic of the stage of sensorimotor intelligence. Practice or functional play is what Piaget (1962) called “a happy display of known actions” in which children repeatedly practice their schemes for actions with objects or their own bodies. It is demonstrated by the play of the infant—the grasping and pulling, kicking, and propelling of arms and legs that infants engage in for the pleasure of mastering the movement. It continues as children take part in activities such as

![Figure 2.1](image-url)
splashing water or sifting sand, honking a horn, or riding a bike. Practice or functional play remains a major form of activity throughout childhood and adulthood. How many adults doodle while talking on the phone or enjoy the exhilaration of jogging or moving to music? Opportunities for practice play remain an important source of development and pleasure throughout life and provide an essential feature of school curriculum, as we illustrate in subsequent chapters.

Symbolic Play  The second stage, symbolic play, begins at about 18 months of age and is a major characteristic of the stage of preoperational intelligence. Symbolic play involves the use of mental representation to pretend that one object stands for another or to take on a make-believe role. It forms a foundation of future abstract thinking and the ability to organize both work and play experiences as human beings develop. Three major forms of symbolic play are described by Piaget: constructive, dramatic, and games with rules, which coincide with the beginnings of conceptual thought.

The first, constructive play, provides a natural link between practice or functional play and more sophisticated forms of symbolic play. In constructive play, the child uses concrete objects to create a representation of an object: blocks or playdough manipulated to represent a house are typical examples. The intent in constructive play is to approach one’s mental representation of the symbolized object as closely as possible.

Three-year-old Sandy searches for just the right size and number of sticks to make five candles on her birthday cake.

Following closely on the heels of constructive play, and often overlapping it, comes dramatic play. This play involves the creation of imaginary roles and situations and frequently accompanies the construction of pretend objects, but the representation is more abstract. Instead of simple object symbols, children use gesture and language to create imaginary roles and situations with complex themes, characters, and scripts. Sometimes this play is sociodramatic in nature, involving the negotiation of roles and pretend themes with others. At other times the play may be solitary, with characters, themes, and situations enacted by a single player.

As Josh finishes his garage of blocks and parks a toy car in it, he pretends that an imaginary family piles into the car for a trip to the beach.

Sandy invites several children to play the part of guests at the birthday party as she enacts the role of the birthday girl. She “blows out” the stick candles, and the group shares her sand birthday cake.

Both stages of symbolic play, constructive and dramatic, are intellectually and socially complicated. Their mastery sets the stage for playing games with rules, which appears around the age of 6 or 7 and continues as the predominant form of overt play throughout middle childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Overt play is an important concept because older children and adults continue to engage in constructive and dramatic play long after early childhood, but in a more covert manner.
Dramatic and constructive play take the form of private fantasy and hypothetical-deductive thinking and accompany the daily internal lives of adults in many of the same ways that overt dramatic play enriches the lives of young children.

**Games with Rules**

The *games with rules* stage involves adherence to an external set of social rules that governs play. This type of play marks the transition from preoperational to concrete operational thought in Piaget’s theory. In this play, rules may be negotiated and agreed on by the players before the game begins or negotiated on the spot as children spontaneously invent a game. The ability to negotiate and adhere to mutually agreed-on rules has its roots in the ad hoc negotiation of rules common to sociodramatic play at earlier stages of development (see Piaget, 1965c).

Piaget (1962) also theorized about the emotional nature of symbolic play, discussing the cathartic or “liquidating combinations” in play that allow children to discharge emotions associated with disturbing experiences. He also discussed the compensatory function of symbolic play that provides opportunities to “correct” reality that is confusing or unpleasant. So, for example, a child spanking a baby doll might discharge anger about his or her own punishment. Replaying a situation in which the child was not allowed to stay out after dark might prompt a dramatic play sequence of hunting monsters all night in the forest.

**VYGOTSKY: DEVELOPMENT AND PLAY**

Lev Vygotsky was a constructivist theorist primarily concerned with how development and learning takes place through social interactions within historical and cultural contexts. The English title of his major work, *Mind in Society*, conveys that the mind
can never be considered or discussed as separate from the social, cultural, and historical context.

The influence of Vygotsky’s work continues to grow in early childhood education practice and research. Vygotsky believed that conflict and problem solving in social situations are essential features of child development, as are make believe and play (Berk, 1994). In this chapter we discuss four important social–cognitive processes that are central to his theory: the zone of proximal development, the movement from interpersonal to intrapersonal knowledge, the acquisition of mental tools, and the transition from implicit rules to explicit rules.

The Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky coined the term zone of proximal development (ZPD) to refer to the context in which the child’s understanding is furthered as a result of social interactions. He wrote that children perform beyond their usual level of functioning when engaged in the social and cognitive collaborations that create this zone. Vygotsky explained that play was essential to development and, in fact, the source of it: “Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development” (1967, p. 16).

By observing children’s symbolic play, teachers discover how new concepts, skills, and competencies emerge in the play of each child in relationship to others.

Steven and Anthony are playing near the tunnel in the outdoor play yard. Steven, lying on his stomach with a face full of mock agony, moans, “Pretend you gave me medicine.” Anthony pretends to feed him medicine, and Steven leaps up, announcing, “All better.” Then Anthony becomes the patient, and Steven feeds him pretend medicine. They each take two turns. Then Anthony says, “I’m hungry,” and they rush inside to get their lunch boxes, returning to the outdoor play area with a snack of pretzels. Steven holds up a pretzel and asks, “What letter?” “No letter,” responds Anthony, and Steven takes a bite. “Now it’s a B,” shouts Anthony, and he bites his pretzel. “What letter?” “An O,” shouts Steven. The final bite is eaten. “Now what letter?” asks Steven, holding out his empty hand. “No letter!” shouts Anthony delightedly, and they both fall on the ground laughing.

Anthony and Steven have created a ZPD where their understanding of letters is further developed. In viewing play as the source of the ZPD, we focus on the co-construction, that is, the joint construction, of a pretend reality that is invented by the players and sustained by the rules they negotiate. Because relationships are of primary importance to young children, their desire to participate in imaginary worlds shared with others leads them to accept and invent new symbolic meanings, regulate their own impulses, and collaboratively construct pretend realities. As this vignette illustrates, children’s co-construction of knowledge can be observed across a wide range of early childhood settings.
Another of Vygotsky’s important contributions to understanding play and development is his assertion that every function in development occurs first at the social or interpersonal level and later at the individual or intrapersonal level (Vygotsky, 1978). In this view, social activities between children and adults or among peers promote development and are of primary importance.

In most cultures, this includes lullabies and baby games. Infants hear patterns of communication, not only the structure of language but also rhythm and intonation. The feature above, Family Diversity: A Mother Plays with Her Child in Her Native Language, illustrates this in further detail.

Young children frequently learn a new concept or skill with others, such as Amy learning to use a funnel to try to fill a water balloon with her playmates at the water table. She then tries her new concepts and skill in the bathtub at home. In schools, children learn from adults and from other children in both formal and informal activities. In this way, they develop understandings of activities and adult roles that are time and culturally specific.

At her retirement dinner, Leni is asked how things have changed in the 30-plus years since she started teaching:

Things are the same when I think about painting and drawing activities. But it’s different for writing and even pretending to write. I started teaching before there were computers. Back in the ‘80s when they played office, the kids pretended to type using the old upright typewriter we had. Now kids use computers—and not only for pretend
play, but to write and send class e-mails. And, I remember, when I was in second grade I was taught to write with a fountain pen and we had bottles of ink on our desks.

When I started teaching, this area was agricultural. When the kids played outside, they pretended to drive tractors and trucks. They’d “pick” food to “cook.” Sometimes they’d set up fruit stands. Now the kids in my class pretend to go to the megastore—and they drive vans and SUVs and “commute to work.”

Part of the difference reflects what the children bring to school. But I think a large part of the difference stems from the differences in what I do. I always purposely set up the environment and plan the curriculum to reflect the lives of the families. If you walked in my classroom this year you’d know there are families from many cultures and different countries. We’ve always used simple phrases from each child’s home language. And the languages have changed in the last decades. I’ve spoken Spanish for many years and now I’m learning Mandarin as well. 

**Acquiring Mental Tools**

Vygotsky (1978) explained that humans use tools to make activities possible and easier. Some tools are concrete objects, like levers and wheels, that make physical work easier. Levers and wheels are simple tools; other tools are complicated and often combine a number of simple tools (e.g., a car motor).

**Mental tools** have been essential to human evolution and cultural development. Mental tools are sometimes referred to as “tools of the mind” (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Mental tools often make cognitive as well as physical activities possible and easier. For example, the use of language, whether spoken or signed, is a mental tool central to communication, particularly the communication of more abstract ideas and concepts. Technology, such as tablets, computers, and social media, are other examples of mental tools. Children from all cultures and all times learn to use mental tools from others—peers as well as adults. Teachers know that some mental tools may seem quite simple to adults but are challenging to young children. The chapters that follow provide numerous examples of the acquisition of mental tools and their application in areas related to language, technology, science, mathematics, and the arts.

In the following vignette, use of a metacognitive strategy is a mental tool. Elijah chants, “Over one, under two” to make sure that he follows the pattern he is weaving.

Sam and Elijah go to the same afterschool child-care program. This afternoon Sam (age 5) watches Elijah (age 8) weave on a handloom.

**Elijah:** Do you want to try?

**Sam:** I don’t know how. How do you know what to do next?

**Elijah:** Here. See. I’m making this design. I put this yarn over one, under two. See, it goes over one, under two. Try.

**Sam:** Over one. Ok, under. This isn’t right.
Elijah: Help me do this row. Hold down that one (green). Now I go over (the green). OK. Now pick up those two—the red and orange—and I go under (the red and the orange). Remember, over one, under two. Over one, under two. Just say it with me, “Over one. Under two.”

Sam: That’s too complicated.

Elijah: Maybe next time.

Understanding Rules

Vygotsky clarified how children develop their understanding of rules. He asserted that all play has rules and that with new levels of development, these rules become more explicit. In this way dramatic (pretend) play, where rules are implicit, forms the foundation for games, where rules are explicit. Rules in dramatic play govern the organization of roles and behavior in play and events. For example, “Daddies shake hands like this” and “Firefighters have to hook up their hoses first.” Yet following these rules is largely taken for granted during children’s dramatic play until conflict among players occurs when their expectations differ. Then children assert their versions of the rules governing characters’ behavior and hypothetical events.

As children begin to articulate their ideas about rules that govern social behavior from their experiences and their family and cultural backgrounds, they also confront the ideas of their peers and the adults around them. They develop the capacity to negotiate rules of play that are set forth before play begins, such as a game of checkers or four square. Negotiating rules of play can be particularly challenging for children with developmental delays, children with emotional challenges, or children from families in which the expectations from home and those from school are mismatched. Yet basic to a play-centered curriculum are mutual understandings of social rules, for example, that throwing blocks or sand might hurt other children. In this way, children begin to understand why agreed-on rules are essential to the functioning of society.

Vygotsky’s Levels of Symbolic Play

Vygotsky also contributed to our understanding of how play relates to levels in the development of symbolic thinking. He observed that very young children merged the meaning of objects with the objects themselves and thus could not think abstractly. In symbolic play, children use objects to represent ideas, situations, and other objects. Objects that represent other objects are called pivots. Children use pivots to anchor their mental representations of the meanings of words. For example, when Sam selects a book to represent a taco in his kitchen play, he anchors his concept of “taco-ness” with an object that opens and closes, and thus resembles a real taco. When children’s representational competence grows, pivots become less necessary, and meaning may be carried completely in the mind, for instance, through the use of an imaginary object. For Vygotsky, the use of objects in play as
support for the development of meaning-in-the-mind marks a key stage in the development of thought (see Vygotsky, 1967, 1978).

**MEAD: PLAY AND THE DEVELOPING SENSE OF SELF**

In all early childhood settings, teachers attempt to understand and support children’s developing sense of self. In *Mind, Self, and Society*, George Herbert Mead (1934) described the relationship of play to the development of a stable sense of self.

For Mead, play is the major vehicle for young children to learn to differentiate their own perspectives from those of others in their social worlds. As children take on pretend roles of others and coordinate those roles with the roles taken by their playmates, they come to view their own behavior from the perspectives of other people.

Robert is playing at being a waiter in a restaurant. He incorporates the perspectives of his “customers” when he asks them if they are ready to order. He then communicates with his “cook” in the kitchen and tells his customers: “It will take a long time to get a burger here. Better go to McDonald’s.”

This negotiation between the self and others also takes place outside play scripts, as we see when Robert, his cook, and his customers have to figure out how they will
put away the props and furniture for their restaurant when the teacher announces that it’s cleanup time.

**The Play Stage**

According to Mead, the preschool and primary-grade years provide the impetus and context for children to see themselves as unique human beings within the community of others. In Mead’s theory, the young preschool child operates in the play stage of the development of the self. This is the stage in which a child can accomplish simple role transformations from self to others. This is what Smilansky (1968) described as the beginning stages of role-play. The child simply becomes a tiger, or an astronaut, or a veterinarian, and then returns to being the self with limited expansion of the components or complementary roles involved in the transformations.

Three-year-old Jed announces “I’m a fireman! RRRRRRR!” and races around waving an imaginary hose. Five minutes later he becomes a puppy, barking and crawling on all fours.

In Mead’s terms the child is just beginning to differentiate the “I,” or spontaneous aspect of the self, from the “me,” or the sense of the self as a social object. In transforming himself into a puppy, for example, Jed is beginning to figure out how others might view him from their perspectives. This is the stage in which children often create imaginary companions, representing the companion’s viewpoint as well as that of the self. Children at this stage form the rudiments of a sense of self that include their own perspectives as well as representations of how others view them. Emphases may differ according to culture; for example, cultural values and interpretations of children’s behavior within an individualistic cultural orientation may be different from those with a collective or mutual interdependence cultural orientation.

**The Game Stage**

As role-playing becomes more complex, children enter into what Mead called the game stage of the development of the self. As the following vignette about Cindy shows, the child can coordinate the “I” aspect of herself with complex representations of the viewpoints of others about the “I.”

Five-year-old Cindy simultaneously plays the role of mother to her child, who is eating breakfast, wife to her husband, who is on his way to work, and ballerina to her coach, who has just called her on the phone in a typical “morning in the playhouse” enactment.

Not only does Cindy need to adjust her voice tone, gesture, and language to what she believes is appropriate for each role, but she must also imagine the complementary roles of others to each of her roles and coordinate them. All the while she uses cardboard chips to represent scrambled eggs and pours milk from a wooden block.
At this point, the child in the game stage of development is learning to coordinate her representation of herself with the multiple perspectives that others might take. She can think about the various aspects of her “pretend selves” in relation to the other players. She shifts fluidly from the “I” to the “me” and considers herself a social object as well as an actor in her play.

**The Generalized Other Stage**

The third stage of the self that Mead describes is that of the generalized other. In this stage the child not only coordinates the “I” of the self with multiple “me’s” but also adopts a metacognitive stance regarding the framework within which action takes place. For example, Cindy might begin to comment on the rules of her culture that define authentic roles of mother or ballerina or spouse. Early childhood educators frequently see children in this stage discuss their roles with comments such as, “Doctors talk like this” or “Babies walk this way.”

Initially, such negotiations may be particularly challenging for children who are bicultural and bilingual. However, it is precisely these very capabilities that can support children’s abilities to take the perspectives of others.

In the dramatic play area, Eun Mi and Hyun Jae are engrossed in cooking, speaking in Korean as they prepare the pretend food.

*Eun Mi:* This special rice and kimchee is for grandfather.

*Hyun Jae:* And bring one rice bowl for grandmother! And this is for our “brother” Chung Shik.

By speaking Korean, they can express nuances of perspective taking, relationships, and customs that are hard to translate into English. For example, with this short, two-sentence exchange, they have indicated that they honor their grandparents not only by their terms for grandparents but also when Eun Mi uses the honorific term for rice. Hyun Jae uses the term for brother that communicates that their pretend brother Chung Shik is older than she. She has also shown that she is aware of the two different counting systems and has used the correct system for counting bowls. In these sentences, both children use verb forms that show they know they are talking to peers.

The generalized other stage is one in which games with rules become of interest as children coordinate the perspectives of players with their understanding of the framework that governs the rule structure of the game. Mead emphasized the importance of the social context in which children learn a game. This behavior reflects the understandings children have about the social rules of our culture, as expressed in both their role behavior within the play and in their negotiations about roles outside the play. This development takes time. Older preschoolers and kindergartners may follow game rules presented and played out in a rigid manner. Teachers find that
children delight in creating their own games or devising their own rules for such games as Candy Land or Chutes and Ladders (Monighan-Nourot, Scales, Van Hoorn, with Almy, 1987).

Sally, 4½ years old, has been playing Candy Land intently, by herself, for 30 minutes. She began by sitting on the floor and placing all the cards in front of her in straight rows—face up. She then carefully opens the board and puts all the markers on Start. She selects one marker. At that moment, she notices Pat, her teacher, observing her and invites her to sit and play.

*Sally explains:* “First, you have to pick a bunny or something to be your marker thing. Then you look at the board and see where you want to go, and pick the card that matches it!”

Pat explains that Sally invented her own version of this game with rules. She delights in this game that reverses the rules so that they match her desires: She first decides where she wants to go, then picks the card.

**ERIKSON: PLAY AND MASTERY IN THE INNER WORLD OF CHILDHOOD**

Erik Erikson wrote extensively about the importance of play for young children’s emotional development (see Erikson 1950/1985, 1977). When naming his theoretical orientation, he combined “psycho” and “social” to emphasize that the individual’s inner psychological state is inseparable from the social context.

*Psychosocial theory* continues to influence early childhood education practice for several reasons. Teachers are concerned with supporting children’s emotional and social well-being. Teachers turn to psychosocial theory in their efforts to foster children’s mental health. Erikson described the development of the healthy personality from infancy through old age. In numerous writings, he theorized about how children’s social and emotional development relates to their families, school, and the cultural contexts in which they live. Psychosocial theory, as Erikson explained, extends Freud’s psychoanalytic theory by considering both the inner psychological dimensions and the outer social and cultural dimensions of children’s developing identity (Erikson, 1950/1985).

Erikson described eight major stages of psychosocial development that build on previous stages (Erikson, 1950/1985). The first four stages describe development from infancy through early childhood. Rather than being stages that individuals “pass through,” Erikson stressed that although the healthy personality exhibits the strength of a particular stage (e.g., trust), healthy individuals continue to rework the balance of the strength of the stage and its antithesis (e.g., mistrust) throughout their lives. For example, it is adaptable for healthy individuals of all ages to exhibit mistrust in situations where it is dangerous to be too trusting, such as being challenged to jump from a high wall.
Chapter 2

Infancy: Trust and Mistrust

During the first year of life, infants are totally dependent on their caregivers. The caregiver’s sensitivity and consistency in care lead not only to the infant’s attachment to that caregiver, but also to the infant developing a sense of trust in his or herself and the outer world. The emotionally healthy infant’s basic sense of trust is central to the toddler’s development of autonomy.

Akinyi rides comfortably on her mother’s hip as they walk to the early morning market. She is turned sideways and sees her mother greeting several women that Akinyi sees every day. One of the women smiles, reaches over, and rubs Akinyi’s back. Akinyi can feel her mother laughing softly. As her mother bends to choose vegetables for the afternoon meal, Akinyi rocks gently to one side, tied securely to her mother.

Toddlerhood: Autonomy, Shame, and Doubt

During their second and third years of life, children’s growing motor and cognitive competencies contribute to their psychosocial development. This is a time when children develop a sense of their own power, a sense of “I can do it.” Children’s developing sense of autonomy is shaped by their schools, families, and society. Erikson emphasized that we examine what young children are allowed or expected to do and how adults set limits or boundaries on children’s behavior, so that a sense of autonomy is the outcome overall rather than children’s sense of shame and doubt.

FAMILY DIVERSITY

A Special Education Specialist Visits the Home

Ethan, 2 years old, has delayed gross motor development. Nadia, a special education specialist, has visited Ethan’s home several times each month since he was born. She watches on as Ethan and his mother play one of his favorite games, “Can you get me?” Ethan’s mom gets down on her hands and knees. She makes a quick move toward him as she looks Ethan in the eye and, in a playful, higher voice says, “Can you get me?” She turns around and starts crawling away, with Ethan crawling after her. She takes quick backward glances to make sure that he’s able to stay close enough behind her as she modifies her speed. Faster and slower. Faster and slower. Ethan is never more than a foot or two away. “Oh, Ethan, you’re getting me! You got me!” She slows just enough so that he catches her as he crawls along at his full speed.

Later, as his mom talks with Nadia, Ethan continues to crawl around the furniture. At one point, he remains behind the couch for several minutes. Nadia calls, “Ethan, where are you? Are you hiding?” Ethan emerges with a wide grin.
Even for the child who is developing a healthy sense of autonomy, teachers find that the balance between autonomy, shame, and doubt shifts from month to month and even from activity to activity within each day.

William has made a high pile of plates, forks, and spoons and begins to set the table. He brushes against a chair, and forks and spoons fall everywhere. His teacher, Ron, notes that this usually self-sufficient, confident child looks doubtful of his ability and turns to Ron as if for reassurance. Ron stays where he is and responds in a quiet voice, “Go ahead. You’ll fix it.”

**Early Childhood and the Play Stage: Initiative and Guilt**

Erikson called the next stage, usually from about 4 to 6 years of age, “the play stage.” This is the stage of initiative and guilt. The sense of autonomy seen in younger children’s activities slowly develops into more sustained, complex initiatives. Guilt arises when initiative is inappropriate or overreaching. For example, despite her aunt’s admonition to watch out for her baby cousin, Breann attempts to leap from one post to the other, misses, and falls on Duane, who wails in protest.

As they develop, children’s greater motor, cognitive, and social capabilities mean that they are able to initiate complex play with others and sustain play for a longer time. As a toddler, Ethan’s hide-and-seek play is complemented by his mother’s efforts to support his growing autonomy. Older preschool children and kindergartners enjoy related but greatly extended games of hide-and-seek.
Children’s sense of initiative is supported by their increased small and large motor coordination and strength, as well as their developing cognitive abilities.

Matthew, age 5, sits on the rug next to the puzzle rack. He selects a challenging puzzle with more than 30 pieces and a rather abstract picture. He starts with one edge of the puzzle, speaking to himself quietly, “Is this one it? This one? There, I got you!”

For Erikson, this is the stage where imagination holds sway as children create their own “microreality” (Erikson, 1977). He described how, at this stage, children express their initiative in play by developing complex plots with conflicting turns and twists and a wide range of characters.

Children at this stage initiate play to work through past failures and present contradictions. Conflicts between archetypes of good and evil expressed in power roles such as superheroes and space aliens are common themes. Conflicts between child initiative and adult prohibitions are also expressed through fantasy play, such as the "naughty baby." In dramatic play, children enter into fantasies that allow them to explore their concepts of initiative and independence. Play themes that portray children as orphaned or separated from their parents, having to fend for themselves in the woods or at sea, are common in preschool and kindergarten.

Play-centered curricula support children’s exploration of the psychosocial issues of taking initiative and feeling guilt over violating adult prohibitions. In contrast, curricula that emphasize learning by imitating models may undermine the development of initiative. In every teacher-initiated curriculum, judgments of right or wrong are consistently made by adults with regard to children’s processes and products, and children learn to rely on adult judgment and approval rather than their own internal resources. For example:

In completing a teacher-modeled project, Rebecca places the precut green strip of “grass” above her name on the page and then places the “trunk” of the tree at a right angle above it. She begins to tear pieces of tissue paper for her “fall leaves.” As the teacher circulates about the classroom, she pauses and says, “You’ve done a good job on your tree trunk, Rebecca, but your grass needs to go along the bottom edge of the paper.” The teacher removes the green paper strip of grass as well as the brown trunk, placing them to match her own model. Rebecca puts her hands in her lap and stares randomly around the room, as the teacher moves on to guide another child’s activity.

Too much activity forced on the child by others, claim Katz and Chard (2000), leads to “damaged dispositions” of intrinsic motivation, concentration, initiative, confidence, and humor that are essential to the learning process throughout children’s lives.

Adults can support children’s play by providing a safe environment in which developmentally appropriate limits are set to support children’s developing sense of
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initiative. The child who is supported in taking initiative during this stage of development forms a firm foundation for the sense of competence and purpose that develops during middle childhood in the stage of industry and inferiority.

**Industry and Inferiority: Play and Work in Middle Childhood**

The flexible goals of the initiative stage, where process takes precedence over product, evolve gradually into goal-oriented projects where children’s “I can do it” attitude is expanded to include perseverance and self-evaluation.

Several groups of children in Leslie’s second-grade class are writing plays that they will act out in the two kindergarten classes. For the past week, Peter, Lisa, and Leah have discussed dozens of ideas of how to write and perform a play based on the story of Homer Price and the doughnut machine. They are writing the scene where the machine is making dozens and dozens of doughnuts and the three children helping at the store race around stacking the doughnuts everywhere. They draft, read aloud, and agree on each section, then work with their fourth-grade mentor to correct errors.

Oh! More doughnuts!
Wow! More and more doughnuts!
Fast, catch that one!

They stop and evaluate the script. “Let’s use real doughnuts.” “How can we show that there are so many?” “Can we make it look like they’re coming faster and faster?” Next week the children will revise and rehearse. Next Friday is their opening day in the kindergarten classrooms.

Erikson (1977) wrote that play remains important during middle childhood and throughout adulthood. In middle childhood, children also have the cognitive and motor competencies to participate more fully in the work that their culture values. Children construct their sense of industry or inferiority based on these cultural expectations. At this stage each culture provides some forms of formal education or training for adult roles (Erikson, 1950/1985). For example, children participate in chores at home, begin formal instruction in literacy and mathematics, or in some more traditional cultures they may apprentice to a local artisan.

**SUMMARY**

Teachers of young children gain support for their use of play in the classroom by understanding the role of play in the developmental theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, Mead, and Erikson. These theorists suggest that each child develops through a constructive process that is shaped by family and community values and histories. In early childhood programs, these processes result in a peer culture of play that reflects the children’s collective and individual understandings of the world. By learning as much
as one can about the sociocultural factors children bring with them to school, and by observing and listening with care and understanding, teachers can enhance the learning and development of children in their care.

By placing play at the center of the curriculum, we make an investment to protect both the short-term and long-term futures of our children and our society. Play supports the development of intellect and all its manifestations. It also supports more general qualities related to emotional development, personality, socialization, imagination, and flexibility of mind that help to ensure a legacy of adaptation to change and freedom to make choices.

Although not all play may be seen as furthering children’s development, in our view play is the necessary core to curriculum for young children. Play provides the teacher with cues and vehicles for assessing children and implementing curriculum goals. Most important, it allows children to develop to their fullest potential intellectually, socially, morally, physically, and emotionally as they learn to negotiate their developing sense of self with the demands of the group. Awareness of the possibilities inherent in play for understanding each child in the classroom opens many new doors for teachers. This awareness enhances both the professional knowledge and artistry that make teaching preschool and primary-grade children a fulfilling and important profession.

- **A constructivist view of play and development.** In the nature–nurture view of development, “nature” provides the biological givens of the child and “nurture” provides the environmental factors that determine how the biological givens unfold. The constructivist view adds the child as an active force in constructing themselves and thereby influencing and modifying both the nature and nurture dimensions of development.

- **Piaget’s developmental theory and play.** In Piaget’s constructivist theory of development, the ability of the child to effectively function in the world is entirely dependent on what the child can do. Behind all of the child’s actions are biological or psychological schemes. Assimilating the world to the child’s schemes makes it possible to function in the world. However, when schemes are not well suited to the goals of the child, the schemes undergo an accommodation to reality. The dynamics of assimilation and accommodation is tied to the child’s development of play, which goes through a number of stages from functional play to symbolic play to games with rules.

- **Vygotsky: Development and play.** Whereas Piaget focused on the sensory motor and representational aspects of development, Vygotsky focused on the cultural–historic and social aspects of development. There are four central aspects of Vygotsky’s writing:
  
  a. All conceptual learning first occurs in social interactions and later becomes internalized.

  b. All learning occurs in a social zone of proximal development (ZPD,) where the content of the social interactions are developmentally challenging, but attainable.
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c. The culture contains “mental tools” that, like all tools, extend the capacity to interact in the world. Development partially requires the acquisition of these tools.

d. Society and culture provide rules that govern activity. These rules are first understood by the child implicitly, then through development and interaction they become explicitly understood.

For Vygotsky, as is the case for Piaget, play is an essential and critical aspect of all development.

- **Mead: Play and the developing sense of self.** Sociologist George H. Mead wrote about the child’s evolving sense of self, starting with an undifferentiated view where the sense of self is merged with the sense of others that eventually leads to a fully differentiated view in which the child is one social object among others. Mead’s work is based on an understanding of how play affects a child’s developing sense of self.

- **Erikson: Play and mastery in the inner world of childhood.** Erikson described eight major stages of psychosocial development that build on previous stages (Erikson, 1950/1985). The first four stages describe development from infancy through early childhood: trust and mistrust, autonomy and shame and doubt, initiative and guilt, industry and inferiority. Rather than being stages that individuals “pass through,” Erikson stressed that although the healthy personality exhibits the strength of a particular stage (e.g., trust), healthy individuals continue to rework the balance of the strength of the stage and its antithesis (e.g., mistrust) throughout their lives. Erikson emphasized the role of play at each childhood stage of development.

**APPLYING YOUR KNOWLEDGE**

1. Describe the “nature–nurture” debate and your understanding of how a constructivist view contributes to that debate.
   a. Explain a core aspect of all constructivist views of development.
   b. In your own words, explain how play relates to a constructivist view of development.

2. Explain the role of schemes and the dynamics of assimilation and accommodation in Jean Piaget’s theory of development.
   a. List three types of knowledge discussed by Piaget and give examples of each.
   b. Describe three stages of play in Piaget’s theory and give examples of each.

3. Discuss your understanding of how social experience and play are central to Vygotsky’s theory of development.
   a. List four key concepts in Vygotsky’s theory and relate each to children’s play.
b. Give your understanding of the meaning of “pivots” in children’s symbolic play.

4. Briefly describe George Mead’s three stages in child development (the play stage, the game stage, and the generalized other stage) and give examples of how each relates to children’s play.
   a. Discuss Mead’s idea that children progress from an undifferentiated sense of self to an understanding that they are social objects among others.
   b. List three stages of play in Mead’s writings and give examples of each.

5. Discuss Erik Erikson’s first four psychosocial stages and how children use play to support the strengths of each of these stages (trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry).
   a. Erikson proposed eight stages of development, each with a characteristic psychosocial strength and antithesis. The first four stages relate to infancy, toddlerhood, early childhood, and middle childhood. Pair these with each of the following strengths of a stage and its antithesis: industry and inferiority, autonomy and shame and doubt, trust and mistrust, initiative and guilt.
   b. Give your own ideas about how play might help children develop strengths relating to trust and mistrust, autonomy and shame and doubt, initiative and guilt, industry and inferiority.