

Learning Through Play



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Three orientations are being used to pursue the two main objectives of the mandate for the Preschool Cycle Program, which are the global development and universal and targeted prevention. These three orientations are: play, observation of the child's progress and classroom organization.

Play is recognized as the most natural context for children to learn and develop in different areas. This document proposes some key points related to the importance of play in preschool education.

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

“Children have different strategies they can apply in order to learn, including imitating, observing, experimenting and questioning. However, play is the ideal way for children to learn and develop their full potential.”¹

Keep in mind

- › To play is to learn.
- › Play is a means of gaining information.
- › Children’s curiosity is endless.
- › Play allows children to expand their knowledge and skills.
- › Play allows children to explore the world around them.
- › Through play, children can overcome their fears and feelings of powerlessness.
- › Play is an essential tool for thought formation because it allows children to move from action to thought.
- › Play encourages children to build their own identity while discovering the world around them.
- › Play can be experienced alone or in interaction with others.
- › Play takes place both inside and outside the classroom.

“A rich environment where children initiate play, especially symbolic play, with support from an adult, will allow them to explore, create, improvise, portray a role, manipulate and so on. Through play, children activate a sensorimotor and affective memory, acquire knowledge and concepts, structure their thoughts and expand their understanding of the world around them.”²

Keep in mind

- › Symbolic play can be imitative (family, job, animals, etc.).
- › Symbolic play can be imaginative (fictional characters or unreal situations).
- › Play is an opportunity for children to experiment with different roles.
- › In “make-believe” play, children develop knowledge and prosocial competencies.
- › Children who develop their story, build narrative skills that will be important for reading comprehension later on.
- › Children who role-play become culturally functional (store, grocery, restaurant, etc.).
- › Children play when their actions are part of their own reality, without serious consequences in the real world.
- › Play (free of risks and consequences) allows children to focus on learning regardless of the outcome.
- › Play gives way to imagination and innovation.
- › Through play, children learn, adapt to the world and try to internalize it.
- › Using the objects at their disposal, children create symbolic representations of real objects.
- › Symbolic play is made up of bursts of imagination and imaginative “make-believe” scenarios.

1 Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, *Preschool Cycle Program* (Québec: 2021), 9. In subsequent references, this document will be cited as *Preschool Cycle Program*.

2 *Preschool Cycle Program*, 9.

“When playing, [children] learn to develop their autonomy and their relationships with others. They make choices, decisions and discoveries, have ideas, develop scenarios and learn to concentrate and not get distracted. They make themselves understood, often act as conciliators or mediators, and find solutions to problems. Play is also a means of communication, expression and action, and it encourages children to be open to the world.”³

Keep in mind

- › Children are more interested in play if they choose to engage in the action themselves.
- › Children are more involved in play if they choose how they will engage in the action.
- › Play allows children to have various social experiences (sharing, agreeing).
- › Through play, children learn to connect with others, to share and negotiate, and to build resilience and adaptability.
- › By playing a role, children put themselves in someone else’s shoes. They can imagine what others are feeling.
- › Free play calls on children’s active imagination as they create, alone or in collaboration with peers, the rules and boundaries of play.
- › Encouraging the development of autonomy by leaving room for play also means leaving room for conflicts and their resolution.
- › While playing, children can change or negotiate the rules along the way and accept creative, multiple and changing solutions.
- › Symbolic play leads children to clarify their ideas, to discuss them in order to convince others and to take into account the points of view of their playmates.
- › Children who play have the opportunity to develop and strengthen their sense of belonging.

“Sufficient time and space should be set aside for each child to be actively engaged in play. When children know they have enough time to play, they are more likely to become fully invested. On the other hand, when they are not given enough time, the activity will remain superficial. Therefore, children should have two periods of between 45 and 60 minutes of free play every day and should be permitted to choose with whom and what they will play. In addition, they should have daily access to a range of quality outdoor play structures and materials that are age appropriate.”⁴

Keep in mind

- › Play is the natural tool that children use to learn. It is therefore essential to provide the space and time necessary for its deployment on a daily basis.
- › The time devoted to play is a key factor in children’s involvement.
- › When children know they have enough time for play, they are more willing to put in the energy, effort, willpower and concentration that will allow them to achieve their full potential.
- › Free play does not need to be directed, regulated, or even formatted or structured by an adult.
- › Outdoor play, through the contact it allows with the natural environment, which is rich, varied and changing, responds to the curiosity of children.
- › The outdoors, where children’s boundless enthusiasm and vitality can flourish, is a great place to play.
- › Having enough time to play outside allows for observation, experimentation, cooperation, creation and achievement.
- › Time spent playing is essential to children’s development.

³ *Preschool Cycle Program*, 9.

⁴ *Preschool Cycle Program*, 9.

“The enjoyment and satisfaction that children derive from self-initiated play will motivate them to become fully engaged and to persevere.⁵”

Keep in mind

- › Free play is a source of fun.
- › Free play is self-sufficient, with no need for extrinsic motivation, rewards or adult support.
- › Free play is captivating and keeps children engaged.
- › Free play is spontaneous and flexible.
- › Free play allows children to witness and be proud of their learning and achievements.



Mélany Cannavino's class, 2020

“Play also helps with the development of mathematics, oral and written language, self-regulation, concentration and executive functions. With support from the adults, children are able to engage in learning situations based on a combination of play and real-life experiences, and hence begin to assume their role as active students.⁶”

Keep in mind

- › Play responds to the curiosity of children.
- › Play allows children to broaden and deepen their knowledge and develop their skills.
- › Play allows children to develop concepts and solve problems in their zone of proximal development.
- › Free play allows children to wonder, to make varied and modifiable attempts and to find creative, multiple and changing solutions.
- › In symbolic play, children develop all of their executive functions (making choices, remembering the context of play, maintaining concentration, making adjustments).
- › Free play creates conflict situations necessary for the development of emotional regulation.
- › Free play, both indoors and outdoors, helps to lay the foundations for future schooling. In fact, it places children in contexts that are conducive to the development of attitudes and behaviours as well as approaches and strategies that enable them to learn, acquire knowledge and succeed.

5 *Preschool Cycle Program*, 9.

6 *Preschool Cycle Program*, 9.

“The importance of play is recognized as a key contributing factor in the global development of all preschoolers, whatever their needs and characteristics may be.”⁷

Keep in mind

- › Play is experienced in a pleasant atmosphere and allows children to marvel at what they can do.
- › Because children are aware of their abilities and what they can and cannot do, it is easier for them to find balance in freely chosen play.
- › As children become more proficient at playing, they will increase the complexity of their play.
- › Play allows the teacher to observe the children, recognize their learning and needs, and plan interventions.
- › During play, direct or indirect intervention is used to meet the children’s needs.
- › Intervening also means taking an active part in children’s play.
- › An intervention is a temporary and short-lived action, which allows children to continue playing and to pick up where they left off.



Mélany Cannavino's class, 2020

7 *Preschool Cycle Program*, 9.

CHARACTERISTICS AND NEEDS OF CHILDREN IN REGARDS TO PLAY

In relation to the five areas of global child development

“Children start school with varying background experience. All children go through the same stages of development, but they do so at their own pace.⁸”

In general, 4- to 6-year-olds:

- › are naturally curious
- › often jump from one activity to another because they are interested in everything that captures their immediate attention
- › are sensitive to how others perceive them, which plays an increasingly significant role in their definition of self
- › are learning to express, recognize and name their emotions
- › create emotional bonds with their peers
- › have increased interactions with their peers that extend over time
- › will attempt to do things that are beneficial for their development and learning
- › have their own perceptual view of the world, which may differ from the adult view
- › are increasingly able to take initiatives



Mélany Cannavino's class, 2019

In preschool education, 4- to 6-year-olds need:

- › to experience success, however modest, so that they can identify their strengths and improve their self-esteem
- › to feel accepted as they are, without being judged
- › help to manage their emotions, from adults who are attentive to their feelings (e.g. adults who can put their feelings into words)
- › to feel proud of their accomplishments
- › activities and tasks suited to their zone of proximal development⁹
- › to feel capable of learning
- › to receive support as they build positive relationships with other children and adults¹⁰
- › to have opportunities to develop strategies
- › to explore situations in which they must think on their feet (e.g. planning their play, organizing materials)
- › to explore and imagine different ways of performing an action or solving a problem
- › to communicate spontaneously
- › to have numerous opportunities to speak throughout the day
- › to be active
- › to use different motor skills

“Children who learn through play and who feel comfortable in kindergarten will see school in a more positive light and will be more confident, motivated and capable of succeeding.¹¹”

8 *Preschool Cycle Program*, 14.

9 The zone of proximal development is define on page 4 of the *Preschool Cycle Program*,.

10 See pages 54-55 for examples.

11 *Preschool Cycle Program*, 4.

