

Child-Directed Play

Relevant Satellite Accreditation Standards

III. The Daily Program for Children

B. Children learn through self-paced play, and through active engagement with materials, the provider, and other children.

1. Children have opportunities throughout the day to move about, make choices about their activities, and follow their own interests at their own pace. They are active and engaged most of the time.

F. The schedule offers a balance of activities.

1. Most activities are child initiated. Activities planned by the provider are planned according to the interests and abilities of the children.



Kathy's Kids Home Child Care



Let the Dragons Fly Child Care



Explorers of Truth Child Care

The Basics

Child-directed play is spontaneous and self-initiated where children make decisions about their play – including what to play, how to play, and with whom to play. Educators support child-directed play through intentional preparation of the learning environment and honor child-led play by asking open-ended questions, encouraging cooperation, celebrating achievements, and documenting learning.

Why is child-directed play essential? An intentional balance of child-led and educator-led experiences supports children's cognitive, motor, language, social and emotional development. Preschoolers in early childhood programs that spent at least 60% of learning time in child-directed play showed higher school readiness than children in more educator-led programs (Vaisarova & Reynolds, 2022). Multiple studies also show child-led play has greater positive effect on early math skills and shape knowledge than direct instruction (Skene et al., 2022). Child-led play helps children practice making decisions, cooperating with others, taking risks, and thinking creatively – all necessary skills for mental health and social wellbeing.

How can I support child-directed play? Family child care educators intentionally prepare the environment to support self-directed play and learning. Through observation, educators note the interests of

the children in the program and add materials and adjust the environment accordingly to expand their play.

Below are more examples of supportive strategies for child-led learning.

- **Make it accessible.** What is a choice must be accessible in the environment. Consider infant and toddler safety around chokeable items while maintaining freedom of movement for all.
- **Arrange play areas.** Organize materials with similar learning objectives together so that children can find, use, and replace materials based on their individual interests.
- **Incorporate open-ended materials.** Materials with many possible uses (such as blocks, sand, and art supplies) support more imaginative, deeper play.
- **Embrace the boredom.** Brainstorm with children about their play options. Together, fondly remember enjoyable play experiences. Ask open-ended questions about their interests. Offer choices and wait for children to decide.
- **Encourage mixed-age play.** Younger children learn so much from older children, and older children practice empathy and leadership skills when supporting young children. Recruit preschoolers and school agers to include infants and toddlers when it feels appropriate.

I want to learn more!

- [The Power of Playful Learning in the Early Childhood Setting](#) (Article)
- [Observing, planning, guiding: How an intentional teacher meets standards through play](#) (Article)
- [The Power of Open-Ended Materials](#) (Resource)
- [Supporting Children's Learning Through Play](#) (Article)
- [Is more child-initiated always better? Exploring relations between child-initiated instruction and preschoolers' school readiness](#) (Research article)
- [The teacher's role in supporting child-directed play](#) (Research article)

Books available through Satellite's lending library:

(for Satellite participating programs only)

- *Serious Fun: How Guided Play Extends Children's Learning* (NAEYC, 2019)
- *This is Play: Environments and Interactions that Engage Infants and Toddlers* (Luckenbill, 2019)
- *Spotlight on Young Children: Exploring Play* (Bohart, 2015)
- *Developmentally Appropriate Play Guiding Young Children to a Higher Level* (Gronlund, 2010)