

An Educator's Role in Play

Relevant Satellite Accreditation Standards

III. The Daily Program for Children

C. The provider uses a variety of techniques to address, extend, and support children's development and self-guided play.

6. The provider occasionally joins in children's play. In doing so, she is respectful of children's play and participates without taking over.



Tadpoles to Frogs



Miss Cherrie's Fruitful Learning Center



Peluchitos Daycare

The Basics

Educators set up the program's environment to promote meaningful play based on the individual preferences, developmental ability, and social context of children in care. An educator's role in play depends on their educational philosophy, physical and emotional capacity, and children's needs. The educator's level of participation also determines the type of play. For instance, the following are examples of child-directed play:

- **Free play** is uninterrupted time and space for children to move freely, make choices, follow interests, learn new skills, and take risks within the program's environment. It is initiated and directed by children with educators remaining supportive and flexible. For example, children use natural loose parts in the outdoor area to create a home for a frog, and the educator is ready to support as needed.
- **Guided play** is uninterrupted time and space for children to playfully pursue a specific learning goal initiated by the educator. It is directed by children with educators expanding on play through purposeful interactions and intentionally prepared materials and environments (Zosh et al., 2018). For example, an educator adds cookbooks to the dramatic play area to promote children's print awareness during play.

By comparison, the following is an example of adult-directed play:

- **Co-opted play** occurs when a child initiates play but an educator joins and directs the experience. The intrusion results in a loss of children's autonomy and decision-making and restricts opportunities for

active learning (Weisberg et al., 2015). For example, a child is engaged in dramatic play with animal puzzle pieces, and an educator prompts the child to find the correct spot in puzzle board.

[Why consider your role?](#) Type of play and level of adult engagement impacts children's development.

Guided play, when educators scaffold children's learning, results in better math, language, and literacy outcomes (Skene et al., 2022). Free play, in contrast, is essential for children's social-emotional and executive function skills (White, 2021). Co-opted play may be appropriate for children with specific, targeted learning goals, but educators are encouraged to use it sparingly. Educators are also encouraged to occasionally step back and observe while maintaining active supervision to ensure safety. This promotes independent free play and cooperative peer play which support unique developmental benefits like self-regulation and flexible thinking (Gray, 2011).

[How do I respectfully support children's play?](#) Educators scaffold children's play through a deep understanding of child development, the individual children in the program, and their unique cultural context. These considerations help the play environment remain both developmentally appropriate and responsive for children. Educators also vary widely in their direct engagement in play. Some discretely observe with little intervention or feedback while others enthusiastically join in play. Find a balance of when, where, and how to participate in play by observing the individual children and reflecting on what feels authentic as an educator.

[I want to learn more!](#)

- [The Power of Play – Part 5: Adult Roles in Child's Play](#) (Article)
- [Adults in Play with Children](#) (Book)
- [The Role of the Adult in Play](#) (Podcast)
- [Making Play Work for Education](#) (Article)
- [Supporting Children's Learning Through Play](#) (Article)

[Books available through Satellite's lending library:](#)

(for Satellite participating programs only)

- *Serious Fun: How Guided Play Extends Children's Learning* (NAEYC, 2019)
- *From Play to Practice: Connecting Teachers' Play to Children's Learning* (Nell, 2013)
- *Spotlight on Young Children: Exploring Play* (Bohart, 2015)