



Play and Imagination

Introduction

Play is how young children do much of their most important learning. There are many different types of play and each brings an opportunity for growth and discovery.

- When children play pretend or make-believe, they explore adult roles, use their imaginations, practice new skills, and express and process their emotions. Pretend play helps children learn about the world and figure out their place in it.
- Through active physical play, children develop gross and fine motor skills, build muscle strength, and establish a foundation for a healthy lifestyle. As they run, jump, chase, and climb, they also explore the world in hands-on ways.
- Board games and other formal games with rules provide opportunities for children to share, take turns, follow directions, and build math skills.
- During constructive play with blocks, children develop math, science, and engineering skills as they build structures.
- When children engage in exploratory play, they discover the world and everything in it in open-ended ways. It may look like a child is just playing when rolling a ball down a slide, but he's also experiencing science concepts (such as incline, momentum, and friction) and learning the importance of curiosity, exploration, and trying things out.

Families and caregivers don't need expensive tools or props to support children's play and help to make it rich and exciting. Everyday objects and experiences can inspire a child to play, imagine, and learn. A cardboard box might inspire a trip to the moon. A set of blocks might lead siblings or friends to construct a high-rise. Walking up a hill can become an opportunity to march like a penguin or scamper like a squirrel.

Most importantly, whether it's a pretend tea party, a board game, or a game of tag, the fun moments that families and children share as they play help children feel valued, loved, and supported.

This workshop offers strategies and activities to help parents, families, and caregivers find learning opportunities that occur during daily routines both at home and on-the-go. The focus is primarily on pretend play, active play, and formal game play but exploratory play and play with

Play and Imagination (CONTINUED)

blocks and building materials will also be touched upon. Through discussions, hands-on activities, take-home resources, and the “Play and Imagination” video, you’ll find resources to:

- Communicate the importance of play to a child’s growth and development.
- Share the benefits of engaging in different types of play.
- Offer ideas for turning everyday activities and common objects into inspiration for play, imagination, and learning.
- Help participants understand how they can build upon a child’s interests to encourage and support play and learning.
- Demonstrate how asking open-ended questions can encourage play and pretend.
- Highlight some of the ways that play leads to school readiness.
- Discuss ways that playing alone, playing with friends and or siblings, and playing with families and caregivers each offer unique and important opportunities for learning.
- Lead participants in reflecting on how they can apply what they have learned with their own children.
- Lead participants in reflecting on ways that they can enter into different play scenarios with their children and ways that they can encourage children to play on their own or together with friends.
- Try out and practice new ideas with participants.

The Play and Imagination workshop has been divided into the following sections:

- **Young Children and Play**—This section shares developmental information about preschool-age children and play, explores the different types of play, and suggests ways to encourage play.
- **Pretend Play**—This section explores the importance of pretend and imagination and helps families and caregivers see opportunities for pretend play in everyday objects and routines.
- **Active Play and Formal Games**—This section explores the benefits of active physical play and playing games with rules, and shares ways to make the most of these important and exciting activities.

Play and Imagination (CONTINUED)

As you lead this workshop you'll be using the "Play and Imagination" video, which is 7 minutes and 23 seconds in length. In this video you'll meet:

- Aaliyah (age 3) as she pretends to be a doctor and plays a board game with her mom.
- Inanna (age 4) as she pretends with her dolls and gets physically active on the swings.
- Yoong (age 4) as he brings his dad's suitcase on an imaginary trip to Japan.
- Joaquin (age 4) and Tariq (age 12) as they run and play outdoors at the playground.

Preparing for the Workshop

- Read the *Parenting Videos Workshop Overview*, found online in this workshop's Resources section, which contains helpful tips and information about the workshop series.
- Make copies of the following *Tips for Parents*, available in English and Spanish and found online in this workshop's Tips section. Have them available for participants to pick up before the workshop begins or distribute them at the end.
 - *Play Time!*
 - *Time to Pretend*
 - *Ready for School*
- Watch the "Play and Imagination" video. Take notes as you watch (and as you read through this guide). Keep a notebook of additional ideas and questions. You know your group best and can adapt the workshop to fit the needs and interests of the participants.
- Decide on an opening icebreaker activity. You may want to tailor the activity to the theme of the workshop. For instance, in pairs or small groups, have participants share a favorite play memory from their own childhood. As they discuss, walk around and listen in. Gather in a large group and ask participants to share what made the play they remembered so special.
- Gather supplies, including pencils, pens, and paper, as well as refreshments. For "The Different Ways We Play" activity, you will need sticky notes. For "Everyday Inspiration" you will need paper plates (one per participant), scissors, and markers or crayons. For "Begin with a Box" you will need a cardboard box.

- If you are providing a series of workshops, have a flyer ready with future topics, dates, and times.

Section One: Young Children and Play

Leading Your Group

Begin by discussing the importance of play for young children. You can mention:

- For a child of preschool age, learning is play and play is learning.
- Play really is the work of childhood—children *need* to play.
- There are many different types of play. Today we are going to focus on pretend play, active physical play, and formal game play, such as board games and games with rules. We'll also touch upon constructive play, such as building with blocks, and exploratory play, which includes investigating the world and everything in it in hands-on ways.
- Children learn best and are most interested and engaged when they are having fun.
- Your child doesn't need any special tools or props to play. Everyday objects and routines are perfect for inspiring imagination and learning.
- Children benefit from different play experiences. Playing alone allows children to develop thinking skills and to dive into their own fantasies and interests. Playing together with other children gives them the chance to practice important social skills like working with others. Playing with parents, family members, and caregivers like you helps children to feel secure and helps you both to build a special bond.

Chat and Share

Ask participants to think about a recent play memory. This will encourage them to think about the important role that play has in their children's lives. You can ask:

- What activity or game did you recently play with your child?
- What activity or game does your child like to play with friends?
- In what ways does your child like to play alone?

NOTE: Write down any additional questions that you would like to include. Is there an anecdote from your own life that you can share? Add that, too.

Watching and Learning

Watch the entire “Play and Imagination” video together. (You will have an opportunity to return to various segments of the video throughout the workshop.) Before you watch, tell participants:

- In this video, you'll see young children playing indoors and outdoors in many different ways.
- Notice the different ways in which the children play and think about what they might be learning as they play.

Reviewing and Reflecting

Lead a conversation about what participants noticed in the video. You might ask:

- In the video, what kinds of play did you see taking place?
- What examples of pretend play did you see? Active play? Game play?
- What learning was going on as children played in these different ways?

Trying It Out

The Different Ways We Play. Explore the many ways children play.

- Say to participants, *As we saw in the video, children play in so many different ways. Let's focus on the different ways that our children play.*
- Break participants into small groups. Give each group a stack of sticky notes.
- Ask the groups to write on the notes the activities or games their children like to play. Begin by giving an example: On one note you might write “building with blocks” and on another you might write “pretending to be a veterinarian.”
- As the groups work, write the following categories on a large sheet of paper, chalk board, or white board that is visible to participants: “Pretend Play,” “Active Play,” “Games with Rules,” “Exploratory Play,” and “Constructive Play.” (Write these as headings, across the top like a chart, so that the groups can add their sticky notes beneath the different categories.) If necessary, provide an example of each type of play so participants are reminded of each type and what it includes.
- When the groups have finished, ask them to place their notes beneath the appropriate category.

- Look at your chart together. Notice which types of play seem to happen most and which seem to happen least. Ask questions that will encourage participants to think about the different types of play and ways they could encourage children to play in each way. You might ask, *Which type of play appears to be most popular among our children? Why do you think this is the case? What do you notice your child learning as she plays in this way?* Then you might also ask the same questions for the type of play that happens least.
- Ask participants to think of things they might do to encourage and support these different types of play.
- As they contribute observations praise participants for all the valuable learning that they are promoting through play. You can mention, *When children engage in pretend play, they build thinking skills and confidence and they work through emotions. When they engage in constructive play, they build math and science skills. When they play actively, they build physical abilities. When they play games with rules, they practice taking turns and have many opportunities to use math skills like counting. When they get involved in exploratory play, they discover science concepts.*

Section Two: Pretend Play

Leading Your Group, Part 1

Share the importance of pretend and fantasy play. As you discuss, draw supporting examples offered by participants in your initial discussion. Focus on how participants can encourage and support learning and play opportunities during everyday interactions. You can mention:

- On our chart we can see many examples of our children engaging in pretend play (for example, “Carla’s daughter plays teacher with her stuffed animals”).
- Young children love to pretend. It’s how they learn about the world and their place in it.
- Pretend play (that is, fantasy and make-believe) offers children a safe and supportive environment where they can explore adult roles (chef, doctor, teacher, etc.), use their imaginations, practice new skills, and express and process their emotions. Pretend play helps children to learn about the world and figure out their place in it.
- Fantasy play helps your child feel strong, confident, competent, and in control of his world (for example, Brian’s son pretends to be a wizard who can make people disappear).

Play and Imagination (CONTINUED)

- Children can play pretend anywhere—on a trip to the grocery store, in the backyard, or as they brush their teeth.
- Children will copy things they see you do—the way you walk, the way you cook, the way you work on the computer, etc. This allows them to try out different roles and better understand their place in their family.
- It's important that children have the chance to engage in pretend play by themselves, with friends, and also with you. When they play by themselves they get the chance to explore their own imagination and go in any direction. When they play with others, they have a wonderful opportunity to collaborate, listen to others, communicate their thoughts, and adapt their play to incorporate other people's ideas. When they play with you, they get to experience you in a different role and have the chance to share their fantasies and emotions with you, which in turn helps them to feel loved and supported.
- You can encourage and support your child's pretend play by setting up spaces with clothing and objects for inspiration, by using everyday situations and objects to inspire pretend play, and by asking questions that stretch your child's imagination.

Chat and Share

Draw participants' attention to the fact that pretend play can happen anywhere and with any object. Recall the examples of pretend play that were already provided. Then, ask questions to help participants go deeper. You can ask:

- What does your child like to pretend?
- When do you notice her pretending?
- How does she like to pretend when she is alone? With friends or siblings? With you?
- Is there a story you can share about your child's pretend play or fantasy play?

NOTE: In your notebook, write additional questions that you would like to include. Is there an anecdote from your own life that you can share? Add that, too.

Watching and Learning

Watch a portion of "Play and Imagination" together. Begin at 00:55, as Yoong is buckling his "seatbelt," and end at 2:30, after Inanna's mom says "I want to do what she wants to do, and that's what she likes to play."

Reviewing and Reflecting

Lead a conversation about what participants noticed in the video. You might ask:

- Yoong takes a trip to Japan. Why is this type of pretend play important? What is he learning?
- Yoong's dad mentions that when Yoong engages in pretend play, he often uses "accessible things," that is, objects found around the house. In this scene, a suitcase inspires Yoon's imaginary trip. What everyday objects does your child use as she engages in pretend play?
- Innana is out for a walk when she hops on a swing. Suddenly she is taking an imaginary trip to Disney World and is flying like a fairy. What activities inspire your child to engage in pretend play?
- What do you notice the parents doing to support their child's pretend play experiences?
- What ideas did you get for how you can support your child's pretend play?

Trying It Out

Everyday Inspiration. Use an everyday item to encourage pretend play.

- Explain, *Everyday objects are great at inspiring play. In the video Yoong pretends with a suitcase. Even a simple object such as a paper plate can inspire your child to use her imagination.*
- Give each participant a paper plate and demonstrate how to turn it into a mask (cut out holes for eyes and a nose). Encourage participants to make and decorate their own masks so they can be used for open-ended play.
- Suggest that participants leave their mask out for their child to find and observe how he uses it for pretend play.

Leading your Group, Part 2

Delve deeper into ways participants can encourage pretend play by following their child's lead, joining in the play, and asking questions. You can mention:

- As your child pretend plays, you will notice that there are times when he is deeply engaged in his own fantasy while playing alone. Other times you might find he invites you into the play or could benefit from your help to jump-start the play.

Play and Imagination (CONTINUED)

- If it's hard to gauge whether or not your child would like you to join in, just ask. For example, when Linda's daughter is playing bus driver, Linda might ask, "Can I ride on your bus?" Your child will let you know if she'd like you to be a part of her play.
- When you do join in, follow your child's lead and let her take you into her fantasy worlds. If she is playing superhero, for example, she might ask you to jump under a pile of pillows. You may not know why until she rescues you from under "a mountain of rocks!"
- You can also help support your child's pretend play without joining in. Notice what interests your child most and provide objects that will inspire her to explore these interests through pretend play. For example, if she's curious about animals you might set out a cardboard box and a stuffed animal. She might be inspired to build a home for a furry friend or set up an animal hospital.
- Encourage your child's pretend play by setting up an area where her fantasies can unfold. You don't need fancy items or a large area to incite play. Fill one box with old scarves, hats, and other clothing, and another box with spoons, paper towel tubes, recycled food containers, and other household items. Lay out a towel on the floor to designate her special pretend play space. The towel can become a flying carpet, a classroom, an ocean, or anything else your child can dream up.
- Ask "What if" questions and "How" questions to help your child to imagine. As you walk up a hill together you might ask, "What if we were kangaroos? How would we get up this hill?" Suddenly you'll be having fun pretending together as you hop up the hill.

Chat and Share

Ask participants to share their children's interests. Refer to the chart of examples and direct the conversation to help participants see how they can build off these interests to encourage and support pretend play. You can ask:

- What does your child seem most interested in exploring?
- What are her fears? What does she have lots of questions about?
- How do you use your child's interests to support her pretend play?
- Think about a time that you joined in your child's pretend play. How did you know it was a good time to join in? Did your child give you any cues? What were they? How did you go about joining in?

NOTE: In your notebook, write additional questions that you would like to include. Is there an anecdote from your own life that you can share? Add that, too.

Watching and Learning

Watch a portion of “Play and Imagination” together. Begin at 5:13 as Aaliyah’s mom talks about her daughter’s fear of doctors and end at 5:43 as Aaliyah and her mom say “Ahhhh.”

Reviewing and Reflecting

Lead a conversation about what participants noticed in the video. You might ask:

- In the video, Aaliyah is interested in playing doctor. Her mother thinks this experience helps ease some of Aaliyah’s fears about her own visits to the doctor. How might playing doctor with her mom help her to work through these fears?
- How does Aaliyah’s mom encourage this play? How does she join in?

Trying It Out

Extend the Play. Guide participants in thinking of ways to enter into their child’s play and extend it.

- Mention, *In the video we see Aaliyah playing doctor because she has been thinking and worrying about doctors.*
- Ask, *What are some other ways Aaliyah’s mom might help her get more comfortable with the doctor through pretend play? What questions might she ask to encourage her daughter’s play? What are some ways she might join in the play?*
- Break participants into small groups and have them discuss these questions.
- After, gather as a large group to share.
- If time allows, talk through examples on the chart in the same way. (For example, *When Manuel’s nephew plays animal rescuer, what are ways Manuel might use this as an opportunity to introduce his nephew to real information about animals?*)

Section Three: Active Play and Formal Games

Leading Your Group, Part 1

Begin by discussing the many ways that active play leads to learning and growth. As you discuss, draw supporting examples from your initial discussion. Focus on how families and caregivers can encourage and support learning and play opportunities during everyday interactions. You can mention:

- Look at all of the examples of active play your children engage in (for example, Rebecca's daughter plays "Red Light, Green Light" with friends and Anne's son loves to dance to music).
- As your children engage in active play, they build important physical skills.
- Active play is also critical for brain development.
- Playing outdoors is one way to get active and it's essential—it connects children with nature, gives them the space to climb, run fast, and really move in different ways. It can sometimes be hard to find a safe place to be outside in your neighborhood. Try visiting public parks, playgrounds, or nature sanctuaries. You may also find that local libraries, community centers, and even restaurants have safe, outdoor, accessible spaces.
- As children play actively, they like to test out their abilities. Let your child try new physical things on her own before jumping in and helping (for example, reaching for a monkey bar or walking on a balance beam). Your child will build confidence and independence as she tries some of these things on her own.

Chat and Share

Recall the examples of active play from the chart. Help participants see how active play can be a part of everyday routines. You can ask:

- Where does your child have the opportunity to be most active?
- What active games does your child like to play as you are out and about?
- Do you play along? How do you feel after playing actively with your child?

NOTE: In your notebook, write additional questions that you would like to include. Is there an anecdote from your own life that you can share? Add that, too.

Watching and Learning

Watch a portion of “Play and Imagination” together. Begin at 3:26 as Joaquin plays hide-and-seek with his brother and father and end at 4:32 as Joaquin hugs his friend on the playground.

Reviewing and Reflecting

Lead a conversation about what participants noticed in the video. You might ask:

- When Joaquin and Tariq run around the playground, they are getting exercise. What other learning do you notice happening as they play?
- What learning do you see happening when your child is engaged in active play?
- How do Joaquin’s parents support their child’s active play?
- If your child were at the park like Joaquin, what would he most likely do? Would you join in the play? How might you join in?

Trying It Out

Indoor Active Play. Help participants think of ways to get active every day, even when going outside isn’t an option.

- Mention, *Active play often happens outdoors, but it can happen indoors, too, when going outside isn’t an option.*
- Ask participants to brainstorm active games they might play with their child indoors.
- Make a list of these games on the board or on a large sheet of paper and encourage participants to jot down the ideas and try them at home.

Leading Your Group, Part 2

Now discuss the importance of formal games with rules. As you discuss, draw supporting examples that have been offered by participants in previous discussions. Focus on how families and caregivers can encourage and support learning and play opportunities during everyday interactions. You can mention:

- Young children are just beginning to be able to follow rules and learn how to take turns.
- Board games and other games with rules, such as Pictionary and Charades, are a great way to help build these skills.

Play and Imagination (CONTINUED)

- When your child plays games with rules he gets practice talking and listening, following directions, collaborating and negotiating, and taking turns.
- Board games also offer lots of opportunities for counting and problem solving.
- Many formal games include dice or counting, which encourages development of math and fine motor skills. Your child will be counting, sorting, and matching while having fun.
- Games such as Charades build verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as gross motor skills.
- Guessing games build your child's ability to notice and describe the things around him.
- Digital games, when selected thoughtfully, can be wonderful. Download apps or educational games for "on-the-go moments" such as car trips, bus rides, or standing in line.
- Formal games are great for bringing the entire family together.
- You can encourage your child to make up his own games, too. As he teaches everyone the rules, he'll be building language skills and thinking skills.

Chat and Share

Recall the examples participants provided of their children's formal game play. Ask questions to help them recognize the benefits of formal game play and how to integrate it into daily routines. You can ask:

- In addition to the games on the chart, what other formal games does your child play?
- What games could you play as you are out and about (for example, I Spy)?
- What are some games that you have made up with your child?
- What are some guessing games you might play in the grocery store?
- If you were to carry a die around in your pocket, what are some ways you might use it to play games throughout the day?

Watching and Learning

Watch a portion of "Play and Imagination" together. Begin at 4:44 as Aaliyah's mom talks about the pizza game and end at 5:10 after she tells Aaliyah she did a good job.

Reviewing and Reflecting

Lead a conversation about what participants noticed in the video. You might ask:

- In the video, Aaliyah plays a pizza sorting game with her mom. What do you think Aaliyah is learning from this game?
- How might you build upon this game to make it even more of a rich experience for Aaliyah?

Wrapping Up

End your session with an activity to help participants bring new knowledge home.

Begin with a Box. Encourage participants to think again of their own children and the many different ways they play.

- Break participants into three small groups.
- Show participants a cardboard box and ask, *What are some ways a child might play with this box?*
- Assign each group to one of the three types of play: pretend, formal games, and active play. If you have time you can also include constructive play and exploratory play.
- Say, *Group One will generate ideas about how a child might use the box for pretend play. Group Two will come up with ways a child might use the box for active physical play. Group Three will come up with ways a child might use the box to create a game with rules.*
- After participants have brainstormed within their small groups, bring the groups together and have them share their ideas in one large group.
- As participants share, ask, *What do you think a child might be learning as he plays with the box in this way?*
- Stress that pretend play, formal game play, and active play are just a few examples of different types of play. Ask, *Can you think of other ways a child might play with the box to build something? How might a child use the box for exploratory play?*

As you say goodbye to your group, remind participants that children learn through all forms of play and that play can happen anytime and anywhere. You can mention:

Play and Imagination (CONTINUED)

- Children learn through play. Time spent playing is time spent learning and growing.
- Play is how children explore ideas, express themselves, build confidence, interact with others, and learn about the world.
- Pretend play, active play, formal games, exploratory play, and constructive play are just a few of the types of play your child engages in.
- It is important for children to get the chance to play alone, with friends and siblings, and also with you. Each of these scenarios offers a unique learning experience.
- You don't need to travel anywhere or buy anything to engage in play. Play can happen anywhere and with anything.

If possible, leave time so participants can mingle and chat with one another, talk with you individually, and browse the handouts you've brought.

Massachusetts Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences

The Play and Imagination workshop has been designed to meet the Massachusetts Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences. The purpose of these guidelines, developed by the Massachusetts Association for the Education of Young Children for the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) in 2003, is to provide a comprehensive view of the development of preschoolers while documenting the experiences that support this development and school readiness. The guidelines are for parents as well as early education and care professionals.

For more information about the guidelines, including definitions of terms, visit <http://www.mass.gov/edu/birth-grade-12/early-education-and-care/curriculum-and-learning/>.

This workshop aligns with the following guidelines:

Learning in English Language Arts

Children will be able to:

Observe and use appropriate ways of interacting in a group (taking turns in talking; listening to peers; waiting until someone is finished; asking questions and waiting for an answer; gaining the floor in appropriate ways).

Participate actively in discussions, listen to the ideas of others, and ask and answer relevant questions.

- Communicate personal experiences or interests.
- Listen to and use formal and informal language.
- Link letters with sounds in play activities.
- Listen to, recognize, and use a broad vocabulary of sensory words.
- Use their own words or illustrations to describe their experiences, tell imaginative stories, or communicate information about a topic of interest.

Learning in Mathematics

Children will be able to:

- Connect many kinds/quantities of concrete objects and actions to numbers.

Play and Imagination (CONTINUED)

- Listen to and say the names of numbers in meaningful contexts.
- Use positional language and ordinal numbers (first, second, third) in everyday activities.
- Sort, categorize, or classify objects by more than one attribute.
- Explore and identify space, direction, movement, relative position, and size using body movement and concrete objects.

Learning in Science and Technology/Engineering

Children will be able to:

- Ask and seek out answers to questions about objects and events with the assistance of interested adults.
- Use their senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste to explore their environment using sensory vocabulary.
- Observe and describe ways that animals, birds, and insects use various parts of their bodies to accomplish certain tasks and compare them to ways people would accomplish a similar task.

Learning in History and Social Science

Children will be able to:

- Discuss examples of rules, fairness, personal responsibilities, and authority in their own experiences and in stories read to them.
- Observe, discuss, and dramatize basic economic concepts such as buying and selling, producing, and consuming.
- Observe and discuss the various kinds of work people do outside and inside their homes.

Learning in Health Education

Children will be able to:

- Build body awareness, strength, and coordination through locomotion activities.
- Build awareness of directionality and position in space.

- Use both sides of the body to strengthen bilateral coordination.
- Build upper body strength and stability to gain controlled movement of shoulders.
- Use eye-hand coordination, visual perception and tracking, and visual motor skills in play activities.
- Recognize and describe or represent emotions such as happiness, surprise, anger, fear, sadness.
- Practice independence and self-help skills.

Learning in the Arts

Children will be able to:

- Explore activities and vocabulary related to movement, balance, strength, and flexibility.
- Express themselves freely through movement.
- Use dramatic play, costumes, and props to pretend to be someone else.
- Create scenarios, props, and settings for dramatizations and dramatic play.
- Create characters through physical movement, gesture, sound, speech, and facial expressions.