



# Playing and Learning

## Introduction

Children learn about themselves, other people, and the world through play. When parents and caregivers encourage their little ones to investigate the things around them and play throughout the day, they help their children to learn and grow. Play doesn't just mean having fun with games and toys. For children, play means exploring the world, investigating objects, pretending, building, inventing and trying new things. In fact, for a young child, playing is learning and learning is playing.

Play helps children to practice new skills, discover how things work, and learn how to solve problems. As children play, they build persistence, confidence, physical abilities, awareness of the world around them, language and communication skills, imagination, and an overall sense of curiosity and wonder. For these reasons, play is a foundation for later success in school and in life. Children who have been given the time and space to play freely and experiment with what's around them will be more likely to try new things and to see every experience as an opportunity for learning.

This parenting workshop is designed to offer parents strategies and activities that will encourage them to play with their children at home and on the go. Through discussions, hands-on activities, take-home resources, and the "Playing & Learning" video, you'll find everything you need to:

- Communicate the importance of play.
- Demonstrate examples of how play leads to learning and growth.
- Explore what play looks like for both infants and toddlers and the benefits it offers children at different ages and stages of development.
- Encourage parents and caregivers to offer children many opportunities to engage in open-ended play and exploration.
- Offer strategies and tips on how to create an environment that will promote play.
- Suggest play-based activities that parents and children can enjoy together.
- Lead parents in reflecting on how they can apply what they have learned with their children.
- Try out and practice new ideas with parents.

In this workshop, you'll be helping parents to guide children in play-based exploration that will support their language and communication development, cognitive development, social and emotional development, and their curious, creative, and persistent approaches to learning.

The Playing and Learning workshop has been divided into the following sections:

**Play and Learn, Learn and Play**—This section shares the importance of encouraging play and exploration right from the start.

**Children at Play**—This section focuses on the different ways that babies and toddlers play and what they gain from their experiences.

**Grown-ups at Play**—This section shares ways that parents can encourage play through open-ended questions, setting up "play-rich" environments, and even joining in the play.

As you lead this workshop, you'll be using the "Playing & Learning" video. In this 05:21 minute video you'll meet:

- Indy (8 months) and her brother Nico (3 years) as they play in a pretend kitchen.
- Ange-Yolette (3 years) and her brothers Adam (6 months) and Gregory (6 years) as they go for a walk and explore objects found in nature.
- Milo (3 years) as he makes up stories with his plastic animals, paints, and pretends with his grandmother.
- Big sister Eloise (3 years) and her brother Otis (16 months) as they pretend-play "bus" together.

## Preparing for the Workshop

Before you begin, read the "Parenting Videos Workshop Overview," which contains helpful tips and information about the workshop series. In addition, you will want to:

- Make copies of the following Parent Tips. Have them available for parents to pick up before the workshop begins or distribute them at the end.
  - *Let's Go for a Walk!*
  - *Play Ball!*
  - *Splish, Splash: Water and Bathtime Fun*
  - *Talk, Talk, Talk!*
  - *Time to Play*
  - *What's That? Everyday Science*

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- *Additional Resources* (You may also want to display some of the books from this list.)
- Watch the “Playing & Learning” 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 you will need to adapt the workshop to fit the needs and interests of the participants. For instance, because the video doesn’t happen to focus on dads and play, it will be important to make any dads in your group especially comfortable in talking about their role in playing with their children, as well as mentioning this if you have all moms in your group.
- Decide on an opening icebreaker activity. You may want to tailor the activity to the theme of the workshop. For instance, you can go around the room and ask parents to recall what their favorite game was as a child or their first memory of playing. You might also start things off with a play song that gets everyone moving, such as “The Hokey Pokey,” “A Ram Sam Sam,” or “Shake My Sillies Out.”
- Gather your supplies, including pencils, pens, and paper, as well as refreshments. For the “Play Tray” activity, you will need: common household objects such as egg cartons, milk cartons, plastic cups, cardboard tubes, empty tissue boxes, pot lids, spoons, gloves, ribbons, rocks, pinecones, and leaves. For the “Box of Socks” activity, you will need: a shoebox with a lid, scissors, and a pile of socks.
- If you are providing a series of workshops, have a flyer ready with future dates and times.

## Section One: Play and Learn, Learn and Play

### Leading Your Group

Begin by sharing the importance of encouraging play and exploration every day right from the start. You can mention:

- Through playing, children develop persistence, confidence, problem-solving skills, curiosity, and creativity.
- Playing also allows children to gain physical abilities, figure out how things work, learn new words, develop language skills, learn about their world, and express their thoughts and emotions.
- Play can take many forms. It's not just games and pretending. Play is also dancing, drawing, solving puzzles, exploring objects, building, doing simple experiments, making sounds, being physical, having fun with books, being with a friend, and making up stories.
- Children who have had a lot of experience with play will enter school more willing to try new things and more ready to learn.

**Playing and Learning** (CONTINUED)

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- Note that it is important for children to see that you love playing, too. It's great to join in your child's adventures. Let your child see you having fun, being silly, getting down on the floor, twirling around, and asking questions.
- Emphasize that play does not require special toys. Children love playing with everyday household items and things found in the natural world.
- Remind parents that play can happen at any time and in any place.
- When children play, they may occasionally become impatient or frustrated. For example, when a block tower falls down, a child may erupt in tears. This frustration actually offers the perfect opportunity to help a child learn important coping skills such as persistence. If your child asks for or indicates that she'd like you to help, you can sympathize with her feelings (learning to "name" emotions is very useful for children's social and emotional development), then help her find a way to solve the problem.

**Chat and Share**

Ask parents to think about the play that happens in and around their home. This will encourage them to reflect on the important role that play already has in their children's lives. You can ask:

- What do your children like to play?
- Are there special items that they like to play with?
- Are there certain places where they play? Why do you think that is?
- When do you notice play happening the most?
- Do they like to play by themselves sometimes? When they play with others, do they prefer a small or large group of friends?

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

**Watching and Learning**

Watch the entire "Playing & Learning" video together. (Note: You will have an opportunity to return to various segments of the video throughout the workshop.) Let parents know:

- In this video, you'll see many examples of play—indoors and outdoors, and on the go.
- Notice the different types of play that happen.
- Notice the role of adults in children's play.

**Reviewing and Reflecting**

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

## Playing and Learning (CONTINUED)

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- In the video, Nico learns about engineering as he builds with blocks; Ange-Yolette learns about bees as she plays dress-up; and Milo uses paint to expand his imagination and create whole new worlds. What have you observed your children learning as they play?
- Ange-Yolette's mom has noticed that her children's play does not require extra tools. Her little ones just use what's around them. What everyday items do your children use for play?

### Trying It Out

**Play Tray.** Help parents discover new opportunities for play.

- Ask parents to empty out their pockets or remove a few items from their purse and set them on the table. Add your common household items to the collection. Egg cartons, milk cartons, plastic cups, cardboard tubes, empty tissue boxes, pot lids, spoons, gloves, ribbons, rocks, pinecones, and leaves would all make great additions to the collection. Make sure you have enough items so that each group can have a variety of items. (Note: Be sure to only include items that are safe for babies and toddlers.)
- Now have parents work in small groups to come up with ways that these items might inspire play for babies and toddlers. Encourage them to think of games they might play with the items and questions they might ask about the items. Ask parents to speculate about ways their children might interact with the items.
- Gather as a whole group and discuss parents' ideas and discoveries. How many play adventures did they find with their items?
- Encourage parents to set out a "play tray" at home. On it they can put objects for exploration. They can change what's on the tray every few days.
- One day they might include a collection of things from nature and a magnifying glass. On another day they might put out a clean, empty milk jug and some paper clips (if their children are old enough not to put things in their mouths or swallow them). On yet another day, they might offer up kitchen tools or a winter hat, some sunglasses, and a scarf.
- For babies, they may want to put out a large bowl, wooden spoon, and tennis ball; pots with matching lids; measuring cups or spoons that nest; containers with wide and narrow openings and odds and ends to drop into them and pour out (be sure they are not small enough to swallow), and so on.

These simple objects can inspire hours of play and learning.

## Section Two: Children at Play

### Leading Your Group: Part 1 (Babies)

Divide this section into two parts. The first part will be about babies, and the second part will be about toddlers. Adapt the amount of time spent on each part depending on how many parents have babies or toddlers.

Begin by sharing some of the unique ways that babies play and interact with the world. You can mention:

- Babies are hands-on, nonstop learners. Babies play and explore because it helps them to learn new things and practice emerging skills.
- Babies love to learn how body parts and objects fit in space. They want to know all about how to make things happen (cause and effect). They spend much of their time trying to discover how to use the things around them as tools to solve problems, as well as how to use language to communicate.
- Any object has the potential to inspire a baby's curiosity: a paper towel roll, plastic containers, a wooden spoon, a sock filled with scraps of paper, a glove, and an unused sponge can all be used as toys. A box of objects, or even just a mirror, will bring joy and entertainment.
- *You* are actually your baby's favorite toy! You are an expert at engaging your child. You know just how to get her laughing and involved, so have fun! A silly game of Peek-a-Boo actually builds important connections in her brain that support a lifetime of learning.
- Babies thrive when they experience many different types of play every day. They like physical play, such as rolling, stretching, dancing, and mimicking movements. They like to play in nature and explore the feeling of wind in their hair and the crunch of dry leaves in their hands. Babies like social play, such as copying siblings, rolling a ball back and forth, or crawling alongside a friend. Babies also love songs, music, and having fun with language. Making clicks and coos are often a baby's way of playing with the sounds she hears around her.

### Chat and Share

Ask parents to think about the ways that babies play. This will encourage them to make observations about their child's development. You can ask:

- What types of activities seem to interest your baby most?
- What surprises your little one?
- What makes your baby laugh?

## Playing and Learning (CONTINUED)

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- Do any activities seem to frustrate your baby? What are they?

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 a portion of “Playing & Learning” together. Begin at 01:28, as Indy is playing with the castle, and end at 02:28, after Otis has played with the basket. Let parents know:

- In this segment, you'll see two babies exploring objects in very physical ways. They shake the objects, test them out, and even taste them.
- Notice the different senses the babies use as they explore.

### Reviewing and Reflecting

Lead a conversation about things parents noticed in the video. You might ask:

- Indy explores several different objects. She touches a castle, tries to grab a milk carton, and experiments with the door on a play kitchen. Her moms observe that Indy is now able to show her interest by reaching for what she wants. What do you think she is learning as she manipulates these objects?
- Otis also learns as he explores. We see him discovering cause and effect as he dumps blocks out of a basket. His mother notices that, when learning something new, he has to try it again and again. Do your children explore in a similar way? What role does repetition have in your baby's play? What are some things you can say to encourage your baby to try things over and over again?

### Trying It Out

**Box of Socks.** Discuss the learning benefits that can occur in one moment of play.

- Show parents your shoebox and pile of socks. Ask parents for ideas about what kind of baby toy could be made from these objects.
- Now cut a hole in the top of the box. One by one, stuff the socks through the hole into the box. Lift the top off the box and reveal the socks. Pour the socks onto the floor. Stuff the box again!
- Invite parents up to use the box and socks in other ways.
- With the group, brainstorm the different kinds of learning that occurred with the box of socks. You might mention that fine motor skills were being developed as the socks were stuffed through the hole. As the socks “disappear” and then “reappear,” children begin to learn that objects exist even when we can't see them. You can also mention: problem-solving skills,

perceiving cause and effect, eye-hand coordination, understanding of space, and creative thinking.

### **Leading your Group: Part 2 (Toddlers)**

Now discuss some of the ways that toddlers play. You can mention:

- Toddlers are often more social in their play. They are beginning to develop friendships and relationships with older or younger siblings. Through play with others, they begin to learn how to share, take turns, and, at a later date, see things from another's perspective.
- Toddlers are extremely interested in the things they see you or others do every day. This can lead to wonderful pretend play. In the video, we saw Nico pretending to cook and Eloise "driving" a bus. Pretend play is a toddler's way of learning about the world and processing emotions. Having a tea party with dolls or stuffed animals, pretending to make and eat food, or pretending to go shopping, deliver the mail, or drive a car are all fun games that toddlers enjoy.
- Toddlers are beginning to explore their independence and like to put their abilities to the test. This can lead to physical play like jumping over things, running fast, tumbling, and climbing. Milo's running and his jumping on the trampoline are great examples of just how physical toddlers can be.
- Toddlers love humor and love to be funny. This often creates play scenarios that are very silly. If they discover that something makes you laugh, they'll do it again and again.

### **Chat and Share**

Ask parents to think about the ways that their toddlers play. This will encourage them to think about the types of resources and environments that encourage play. You can ask:

- Do your toddlers engage in pretend play? What type of play scenarios do they like to act out?
- Have your toddlers begun to play with friends? What types of activities do they do together?

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 a portion of "Playing & Learning" together. Begin at 00:46, as Milo is playing with the giraffe, and end at 01:27, as Ange-Yolette has just finished "flying." You may also want to replay the video from 00:48 to 01:04, which shows how Milo's grandmother has marked off the floor with tape. Let parents know:

- In this segment you'll be watching toddlers engage in pretend play and storytelling.



- Notice the language that they use as they play.

### Reviewing and Reflecting

Lead a conversation about things parents noticed in the video. You might ask:

- In the video, Milo uses his plastic animals to make up stories. As he describes what's happening with his toys, he builds language skills. Do your toddlers engage in a similar type of active storytelling? If so, what themes do their stories tend to revolve around?
- Notice how Milo's grandmother asks questions that extend his pretend play and invite him to continue with a story line. Do your toddlers engage in that kind of play with you or another adult?
- Ange-Yolette dresses up like a bee and pretends to fly. Her mom mentions that this provides a great opportunity to teach her daughter more about bees. She knows her daughter will remember what she has learned because she's having so much fun. What do you notice your toddler learning as she pretends?
- Point out the way Milo's grandmother has used tape on the floor to designate a play space, and how that encourages Milo's imaginative play and exploration.

### Trying It Out

**Pretend Play Space.** Guide parents in creating a pretend play area.

- Explain that toddlers love having a designated area where they can pretend.
- Remind parents that a pretend play area can be in a closet, a box, a shelf, a corner of a room, behind a chair, or in a hallway. A special play space could also be a fort or a tent under a table. Toddlers also enjoy a space where they can arrange toys or other objects to role-play a story, such as a low table for building on, a "garage" for toy vehicles under a chair, or a dollhouse on a set of bookshelves.
- Ask parents to brainstorm items they might put in a pretend play area.
- Ask: *How could you change the area throughout the year to encourage different types of play?*
- Give parents pencils and paper and have them map out a themed play area. What would a pretend store look like? How about a pretend bus station, post office, laboratory, or veterinarian's office? Remind parents that they only need everyday household objects in their designs.
- Have parents share their ideas and encourage them to try them out at home.

## Section Three: Grown-ups at Play

### Leading Your Group

Begin by sharing the important role that parents can have in children's play. You can mention:

- Your little one learns most from you when you join him in play. As we just saw, Ange-Yolette's mom joins her in pretending to fly. She's sure Ange-Yolette will remember this experience when she someday encounters a real bee because they were having such fun together.
- Children need time to explore on their own, but may get frustrated by the things they can't yet do. Encourage your child to keep trying and give him strategies for calming down when he gets frustrated. You can suggest that he stop, take a few deep breaths, and then try again. Let him know that learning new things takes practice for everyone, even grown-ups.
- Ask questions to help extend your child's play. If he's building a block tower, you might comment on how tall it is, or how colorful or wide it is, and also ask: *What are you making? How did you make it? What would happen if you...?* Getting him to explain his ideas and his process will not only give you insight into how he thinks, it will also help him develop language skills. You can also ask questions without words. For example, hand a baby an object upside down, then use your words to comment on what he does. However, note that it's important not to turn a fun activity into a quiz or a teaching game.
- Play can get messy! Children will be more likely to explore if they are not worried about you getting annoyed about the mess: Spread newspapers or an inexpensive plastic tablecloth on the kitchen floor or under your child's highchair. This will free your child to mix, mash, and pour. Also, dress your child in clothes she can get dirty so she can enjoy the mess.
- Encourage your child to engage in open-ended exploration. If she asks you a question, you can respond with, *How do you think we can find out?* You can suggest looking it up on the Web or in books or asking others.
- Play is also a chance to get up and move! Babies enjoy crawling with or after someone, playing knee-bouncing games, and rolling things back and forth. Toddlers love hide-and-seek and follow-the-leader games, chasing things (or you!), obstacle courses, tossing a beanbag, jumping on and off couch cushions, and being part of a marching band or animal parade. Ask parents to describe some of the ways they enjoy energetic games with their children, indoors and outdoors.

### Chat and Share

Ask parents to think about the role they have in their child's play. This will encourage them to think about ways they can enhance and build upon their child's play experiences. You can ask:

- What do you do to encourage play at home?

- Do your children include you in their play? If so, how?
- When you play with your child, who takes the lead? Do you take turns?
- How does your child initiate and end play with you and other adults?
- How does your child keep play going?

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 a portion of "Playing & Learning" together. Begin the video at 02:45, as Milo hangs on a pipe, and end at 04:48, as Milo is painting. Let parents know:

- In this segment, you'll see parents encouraging their children to play by asking questions, contributing ideas, and leading their little ones on outdoor adventures.
- Notice the ways that children respond when parents get involved.

### Reviewing and Reflecting

Lead a conversation about things parents noticed in the video. You might ask:

- In the video, Milo's grandmother extends his play by acting as the "Mama Monster." What do you notice about how she gets involved? How does Milo respond?
- Many of the families in the video mention the importance of outdoor play. How can you encourage play and exploration on your daily outdoor routines? How can a walk down the street or a trip to the post office become an adventure?
- When Eloise and Otis are playing "bus," their mother helps to find a role for Otis. He makes bus noises and acts things out as she "speaks" for him. What are some things that you do in order to help your older and younger children play together?

### Trying It Out

**What Would You Do?** Help parents to guide and deepen their children's play by asking questions to extend the play.

- Play the video again and pause at 02:36 so that parents see the image of the truck and big pile of blocks.
- Break parents into groups. Ask: *If this was your child, what questions would you ask to engage your child? What are some imaginary scenarios you might suggest?*
- Break parents into groups. Have one group share games they play with their babies, have the other share games they play with their toddlers. Ask parents to think of games that take

place indoors and outdoors, as well as games that involve different materials such as blocks, paint, and kitchen supplies. Encourage them to share questions that they ask as their children play each of these games. Ask parents to share ways in which they deepen play through their involvement.

- Once parents have finished talking as groups, ask them to share their games with everyone.

## Wrapping Up

As you say goodbye to your group, remind parents that they have everything they need to encourage their little ones to play, imagine, explore, and learn. You might say:

- Children are born ready to explore. *You* help them to learn as you interact with objects, sing songs, play games, pretend, and have fun together.
- Keep art supplies and toys in a place that your child can easily access.
- Ask lots of question as your little one plays. This will help his explorations go even deeper. Remember that your questions should extend the play, not turn it into a quiz or a teaching game!
- Follow your child's interests and build play experiences out of the things she wants to know more about.
- Feel free to be silly and to play along! Playing with young children gives you the perfect excuse to rediscover the joys you experienced as a child.

If possible, leave time so parents can mingle and chat with one another, talk with you individually, and browse the books and other materials you've brought.

**MASSACHUSETTS EARLY LEARNING GUIDELINES FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS**

The Playing and Learning workshop has been designed to meet the Massachusetts Early Learning Guidelines for Infants and Toddlers. The purpose for these guidelines, developed by the Massachusetts Association for the Education of Young Children for the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) in 2010, is to provide a comprehensive view of the development of infants and toddlers while documenting the experiences that support this development. The guidelines are for parents as well as early education and care professionals.

The first three years of life are a time of rapid brain development and learning. This time becomes critically important for infants and toddlers as they develop foundations for learning. As their children's first teachers, parents have the greatest impact on their children's lives.

Early learning and development are multidimensional. Developmental domains (categories or dimensions of children's learning and development) are highly interrelated. Development in one domain influences development in other domains.

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/>.

The Playing and Learning workshop aligns with the following guidelines:

**FOR BABIES (0-15 MONTHS)**

*Language and Communication Development*

- Demonstrates the meaning of language by listening.
- Develops expressive language.
- Engages in social communication.
- Develops in multiple language acquisitions when considered a dual language learner.

*Cognitive Development*

- Refines reflexes into purposeful actions.
- Develops memory skills.
- Performs simple actions to make things happen and displays a beginning understanding of cause and effect.
- Discovers creative expression through music, drama, dance, and art experiences.

*Social and Emotional Development*

- Relates to, trusts, and becomes attached to consistent educators.
- Acts as a social being by engaging with others and the world around her.
- Experiences and expresses a range of emotions.
- Begins to regulate own feelings and behavior.

- Develops a positive sense of self.

*Approaches to Learning*

- Shows eagerness and curiosity as a learner.
- Becomes intentional and persistent in their learning and discovery.

**FOR TODDLERS (12–33 MONTHS)**

*Language and Communication Development*

- Demonstrates understanding of spoken (or signed) language.
- Develops expressive language.
- Engages in social communication.
- Uses language to ask questions and tell stories.

*Cognitive Development*

- Develops increasing memory of past events and knowledge.
- Demonstrates an awareness that predictable things happen as a result of actions.
- Experiments with a variety of problem-solving strategies.
- Discovers creative expression through music, drama, dance, and art experiences.

*Social and Emotional Development*

- Relates to, trusts, and becomes attached to consistent educators.
- Notices and interacts with toddlers their own age.
- Experiences and expresses a range of emotions.
- Progresses in regulating own feelings and behavior.

*Approaches to Learning*

- Shows eagerness and curiosity as a learner.
- Becomes intentional and persistent in their learning and discovery.