

# The Stuff of Childhood

PLAY EQUIPMENT TO SUPPORT EARLY EDUCATION







# The Importance of Play

When we see adults skimming through work with boundless energy and genuine pleasure we say, “That job is child’s play!” Yet, while adults’ work can seem like play, all children’s play is actually work! Observe closely and you’ll discover that whether they are “it” at hide-and-seek, or pushing a toy car up a ramp, they are determinedly working through self-appointed tasks. Here is a mystery to be respected—this natural presence of work in play form.

Play, for children, is not just recreation—it’s their approach to life. Every action is undertaken with the whole being: mind, body, and spirit. Play is basic to children’s well-being. It’s their way to discover the world around them and to express how they feel and, sometimes, to cope with difficulty. The diligence and concentration that children develop in play will serve them well in adult work.

Open-ended play, in particular, is invaluable to a child’s development and thinking. Here children determine what to do, how to do it, and what to use, giving imagination and creativity free reign. Open-ended play is the child’s means of discovery, of communication, and of

expression. There is no fear of doing it wrong, since there is no “correct” method or outcome.

Nature provides endless scope for exploration and creative play. Digging in the earth, balancing on rocks, rolling down grassy slopes, and climbing trees satisfy basic needs. Sand, pebbles, clay, acorns, seashells, twigs, and pine cones support open-ended play as they quickly become anything a child envisions. These belong to childhood, and any child deprived of them is unfortunate.

Indoor equipment should also supply children with plenty of opportunities for open-ended play.

Loving guidance and appropriate equipment help children understand themselves and the world in which they live. The environment we provide will say more eloquently than words, “Here is a place to play, to enjoy, to discover—to learn.”

What qualities should we look for in play equipment? What should we consider when selecting equipment for the very young? Our attitude to the role of play and playthings will greatly affect the quality of care and the education we provide our children. ■



**“Play is not a luxury** but rather a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development at all age levels.” **David Elkind**





# What Makes Good Playthings?

No amount of planning and equipment can replace genuine love. But a versatile piece of sturdy equipment that matches the developmental needs of the child—not a number of flimsy, highly differentiated ones—will be your helper in loving support of the child and will see you through thick and thin.

## Safety

The safety of a plaything is of utmost concern. Consider the material the toy is made of, its design, and how cleanable it is. Quality products should meet tough indoor air quality standards. Wood is natural, freeing us from the nagging fear of toxic chemicals that accompany plastics. Designs, too, must be safety-conscious, with carefully rounded corners and edges, wood that doesn't splinter, and wheels that won't pinch. Items should be stable and secure without small openings to catch fingers or limbs. Lastly, consider how easily the toy can be cleaned. Are spills easy to clean up? Will it resist dirt? Play will always involve some element of risk, but good equipment will minimize it.

## Developmentally appropriate

Good playthings support the physical, social, and cognitive growth of children, and match their developmental needs. Young children need large, easily manipulated playthings. Toys that are too small can be a source of frustra-

tion because the child is not yet able to handle smaller forms and shapes. Toys of appropriate size develop a child's large and small muscles, and encourage eye-hand coordination. Playthings should be simple enough for a child to comprehend. Simple toys strengthen a child's understanding and experience of the world around him, and promote exploration and self-confidence. Open-ended playthings, such as blocks, build social skills such as negotiation and compromise, and develop cognitive skills of language and grouping.

## Simplicity of Design

Children's playthings should be simple and free from detail. Where details are built into his toys, a child's own ideas cannot find full expression. And the reverse is true—the more unspecialized the toys, the more creative and absorbing the play. Unstructured toys permit a child to create as he wills, with the next step determined by him, not by the play material. Unit blocks are perhaps the best example of unstructured playthings, and are essential for every classroom. Construction sets, clay, sand, and paints are also simple materials that allow the imagination free reign.

## Child Involvement

A good plaything should actively involve children, stimulating them to do things for themselves and thus helping their development.

## good playthings are:

- Safe
- Age-appropriate
- Simple
- Involve the child
- Versatile
- Convey quality
- Durable
- Functional
- Generous
- Economical
- Inclusive
- Beautiful



**“When children** are offered flexible furnishings and open-ended materials, they engage in the range of activities that foster their development and learning. They become more competent in their physical abilities and develop self-confidence and independence.”

Deb Curtis and Margie Carter





**“Toys for children** in groups need to be exceptionally well made to stand up to heavy use. It is usually wise to pay the higher price for equipment than to look for discount bargains.”

**Jim Greenman**

Educators should be wary of electronic games and gadgets which make the child a passive spectator; they may entertain for the moment but have little or no play value. True toys encourage children to explore and create, or offer the opportunity for dramatic play. Materials that only allow the child a passive role are not tools of play, but objects of diversion.

#### **Versatility**

The young child’s natural curiosity and interest are held best with a toy offering a wide range of play possibilities. A unit block can represent a phone, a camera, a piece of cake, or even a baby. Compare that to, say, plastic food items often found in the house-keeping area. A plastic fried egg can never be anything but a fried egg, and thus its play possibilities are seriously limited.

#### **Quality Materials**

Playthings should convey a message of quality. They should be constructed from top-quality natural materials, and be crafted with care. A quality plaything tells the child, “You are worth it!” Wood and cloth are particularly appealing and soothing to children. A wooden toy has a warm, friendly feel that is satisfying and reassuring to small hands. Wood wears with grace. Wooden playthings embody the sturdy longevity a child’s toys should have. Wheels should be able to stand up to heavy wear, with tough bearings

and steel axles. A solid, generously proportioned wooden truck is invaluable, providing all its materials—wooden body, rubber wheels, bearings, and steel axles—are carefully selected with large-muscle use in mind.

#### **Durable**

Have you seen a child’s face when a bright new toy falls apart in her hands? When it goes to pieces someone has let her down. To endure the kind of use a roomful of children can give them, play materials must be sturdy. Children love their playthings, and should be able to depend on them. They need time to develop a relatedness to them, time for the playthings to become trustworthy friends. Playthings which do not last are educationally, as well as economically, unsound. Hardwood like maple, tough and split-resistant, is more durable than softer woods.

#### **Functionality**

Playthings need to really “work.” What frustration when a cupboard door won’t shut, or the wheels on a truck stop turning! Children feel insulted when given “kids’ stuff.” The tools at the workbench should be genuine tools, not cheap copies sure to break on a real job. Likewise all hinges, casters, wheels, door knobs, and handles should be “real,” of high quality industrial construction, designed to take the beating which is the reality of play.







**Generosity**

Play equipment should offer sufficient roominess or quantity to fulfill children’s intentions in play. In housekeeping play, four and five-year-olds want to bake pies and wash dishes. Some of your wheeled toys should be big enough for children to ride on and to haul loads of blocks or other materials. Provide enough blocks for the children to complete the structure they have in mind. Having a generous supply of equipment helps children play together harmoniously.

**Economy**

Have you ever invested in new equipment, only to have it break because it was poorly constructed from inferior materials? Although it seemed a good choice at the time, you learned that a higher initial investment is often the more economical choice. Playthings constructed with care from superior materials last, and do not need to be frequently replaced. Investing in high-quality equipment also helps protect our

**Quality Means Economy**

	Quality Chair	Commodity Chair
Price	\$100	\$80
Lifetime	10 years	5 years
Cost per year	<b>\$10</b>	<b>\$16</b>

environment, since products that last do not end up in the landfill. The durable, well-designed plaything not only outlasts cheaper toys, but also fulfills the criteria for good play equipment.

**Inclusion**

Play is important for every child, regardless of abilities or disabilities. For a child with disabilities, play can be an incentive for development as well as a joy. This often requires the help of specially trained staff and specially designed equipment. Well-designed standard equipment considers children’s special needs. Look for equipment of universal design—what works for all ages and abilities. With a little imagination you can find the perfect combinations of special and standard equipment. It is worth the effort.

**Beauty**

We are all delighted by beauty, but did you know it can actually help you achieve your educational goals? In order to progress developmentally, a child must feel safe and secure. A classroom environment that is soothing and reassuring—a place of beauty—can help children relax and learn. The beauty of natural wood is calming and restful. It brings to mind trees and rain, sunlight and wind. Surround the children you love with beauty. ■



**“An important factor** related to the quality of a program for young children is the type and appropriateness of materials and furnishings. Furnishings and equipment are long-term investments. These items should be durable. Regardless of their cost, the intent should be to obtain the best possible value for durability and long-term use.”

**Rebecca Isbell and Betty Exelby**





# Dramatic Play

**Unstructured, creative** time in the early childhood classroom is decreasing as teachers come under the pressure of standardized tests and school readiness mandates. Yet research shows that dramatic play has a significant role to play in the social and cognitive development of children. Children learn about the world they live in through fantasy or dramatic play.

Children need a variety of opportunities to create, imagine, and construct their reality. In dramatic play, children bring their experiences and questions into the classroom. It gives the child a feeling of competence and control and builds self-esteem.

A dramatic play corner with child-sized furniture fulfills the need for dramatization. No dramatic play area is complete without a few pieces of kitchen equipment—sturdy sink, stove, refrigerator, and washer. Baking pies and washing dishes require roomy ovens and dishpans large enough for soap and water and dirty dishes. Add doll beds, a cradle, and a pushcart and watch their young imaginations flourish!

Or perhaps they want to play office or store. A wardrobe of dress-ups is invaluable to stimulate role play and drama.

Unstructured materials that quickly become a house, an extended train, a fence, or a zoo, are vital in the dramatic play area. The unstructured, open-ended nature of blocks makes them ideal springboards for social and dramatic play.

Children who have been playing entirely parallel or alone can respond within seconds to a cue and become passengers in a bus. Each one pushes a hollow block seat to a place in the lineup and off they go! It may not last, and there may be no driver yet, only passengers—or all drivers—but it is a lovely time with spontaneous songs and hearty good-byes to the teacher.

They are all caught up for one joyful moment in a group experience. We cannot force this interaction, but we should support it with reliable play equipment. ■



**“Fantasy play is the glue that binds together all other pursuits, including the early teaching of reading and writing skills.”** Vivian Gussin Paley





## Social Play

**Children must** develop the skills needed for successful social lives. Through play, children learn to take turns, share, negotiate, and cooperate. They learn to consider the perspective of others. Through group play—a complex dynamic of negotiations and enactments—children express their understanding of the world around them, and come to understand their place in it. Children who engage in plenty of group socio-dramatic play develop advanced social skills.

As they grow and their language skills improve, children spend more time in cooperative play. The toys in your classroom should support these needs of children as they develop. An environment that stimulates cooperative play is teaching children to work and play together—vital skills for every area of adult life. Happy hours of self-forgetful play with peers can be a cornerstone for a child's life.

Blocks are undoubtedly the most important equipment in an early childhood environment. Blocks permit children to create, with the next step determined by them, not by the structure of the play material. Blocks foster the

development of basic math and science skills. In addition, the block corner is a training ground for literacy and social skills. With durable hardwood unit blocks children work together to create designs limited only by their imagination. With the larger hollow blocks they can build a world they can actually inhabit, while reconstructing their experience of the world around them.

A housekeeping corner with child-size furniture fulfills both the need for dramatization and cooperative play. Other playthings that encourage group play are dress-up clothes, dolls, and toy vehicles. A group of children working together to build a train of hollow blocks or acting out their experiences of family life is not only a joy; it is a rich learning experience.

Throughout development, there is a place for solitary play. Teachers can encourage this by providing a quiet, comfortable, and inviting corner. Physical boundaries of classroom furniture, plenty of soft materials like cushions, and appropriate play materials will make this area a safe retreat for the child who needs a little time alone. ■



**“The ability** to play is critical not only to being happy, but also to sustained social relationships and being a creative, innovative person.”

Stuart Brown





# Large Muscle Play

**Remember climbing trees,** rolling down hills, jumping into leaf piles, or running as fast as you could just for the fun of it? These are memories many of us cherish. The increase of modern conveniences and technology has changed life dramatically. Although educators try to give children the physical activity they need, inactivity is more and more tightly woven into the fabric of modern life. Yet we know, activity is a necessity for every child. A young child has immense reservoirs of energy, ideas, and emotions waiting to pour forth from him in a river of activity. Life for him is activity. Anita Olds, architect and child care space designer, puts it simply, “Young children learn primarily by moving their bodies in space.”

Movement aids all areas of child development—physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. Activities requiring total body involvement encourage problem-solving, foster motor development, and build self-confidence. In fact, brain researchers state that movement helps children learn. The importance of whole-body movement and activity cannot be overemphasized.

In the classroom some equipment must be provided to satisfy the needs of growing muscles to push, climb, run, bend, and lift. If space is not available in the classroom, consider using a central gross

motor play area with scheduled group use. Best of all is an outdoor playground.

Toys made of lightweight materials such as plastic do not offer the same large muscle benefits as solid wooden ones. Unit blocks are designed to support large and small muscle building. A simple set of unit blocks is surprisingly challenging for the young child. The stretching of arms and legs as she lifts, carries, and stacks blocks develops motor coordination.

Hollow blocks also provide whole body activity, light enough to handle, yet heavy enough to give large muscles a workout. They should be made of wood that can withstand rough use without splintering, have rounded edges, and be designed to allow small hands to get a firm grip.

Transportation equipment that is pushed, pulled, or carried by children is also essential. Trikes, scooters, kiddie cars, and wheelbarrows exercise large muscles and develop coordination. Jim Greenman tells about a teacher who was tempted to put away the wheelbarrow as “developmentally inappropriate” until she realized that the child’s struggle to make it work was the learning.

A piece of equipment that offers climbing, sliding, crawling through a barrel, and play at two levels is a valuable investment which will challenge and include several

children. Climbing apparatus must be safe, stable, and constantly supervised. Little ones need toys that support and give them practice in walking and balancing. Pushing is better than pulling because it allows the child to see what is happening. In addition, a child needs equipment for climbing and balancing. ■



**“Early childhood** professionals know the many benefits of physical activity and play. They understand that young children are experiential learners, that they need to move, and they move to learn.” **Rae Pica**





# Creative Play

Children whose language skills are still developing bring their understanding of the world to expression in creative play. Not only does artistic expression help children communicate their ideas, feelings, and understanding; the process of creating is a journey of learning.

Through creative play, children develop independence and self-confidence. Higher level thinking skills, such as observation, problem-solving, predicting, and communicating, grow as children create. Self-expression gives children a better understanding of relationships. Whether through modeling, painting, music, or movement, creativity is the process of exploration, discovery, and understanding.

Creativity is fostered when a child can progress at his own pace, using plenty of open-ended play materials to problem-solve and experiment. A child's curiosity, his wish to investigate and express, is central. A wide variety of creative materials such as unit blocks, clay, paint, water, sand, paper, crayons, found nature objects, and recycled materials support the creative process.

The classroom that supports creative play is likely to have a block area where children can plan, create, assess, and rearrange imagined worlds. Plenty of blocks are needed to avoid the conflicts and problems that arise from having too few. Quantities of standard shaped blocks support the children's building needs better than lots of exotically shaped blocks. The block area might also include props such as wheeled vehicles, simple "people" shapes, and a variety of fabrics or found objects.

The art area must be inviting and inspiring, with materials attractively displayed and accessible. In addition to tables, comfortable chairs, and easels, there must be racks for drying artwork, and plenty of storage space. Cleaning up is part of learning, and cleanable surfaces will surely help!

Music is a key to bringing children together in a common experience. Singing together, playing in the rhythm band, humming their own song—music is a language all children share. Encourage it with your classroom arrangement. ■



**"I have seen** the results of a good integration of learning and creativity; I have observed the sense of joy and self-esteem that children gain through this integrated experience."

Lella Gandini





# Sensory Play

**Young children** use all their senses to discover and process the world around them. They are motivated to look, touch, feel, listen to, taste, and smell everything they encounter. An environment rich in sensory stimulation supports all areas of child development. Its hands-on nature is very rewarding for young children, helping refine skills and increase confidence.

Sensory experiences have a positive effect on mental health, offering children a medium in which they can release tension in a non-threatening environment.

The early childhood environment should stimulate the child's senses and curiosity, providing many opportunities to see and touch.

The outdoors offers wonderful opportunities for sensory play. Here is a chance for open-ended play, where hands can get dirty! Mud between the toes, the scent of herbs or flowers, or the sound of running water must be explored and understood. A garden offers children direct contact with nature, life, and growing things.

Indoors, too, the teacher can offer meaningful sensory play. Children are naturally drawn to the sand and water table because of its sensory qualities. A sand and water table is a reliable friend to teacher

and children, a place for satisfying and relaxed learning through looking and touching. Warm or icy water adds to the tactile experience. Or try introducing materials with a variety of textures—cotton balls, tree bark, sandpaper, or pebbles.

A science area with hands-on gadgets, measuring tools, growing things, and insects presents children with many tactile experiences. Manipulatives and materials for creative project work also add texture and interest for children's multi-sensory learning. Organizing, sorting, and arranging found objects can be a source of great enjoyment for children.

The listening area also engages the senses, building listening and communication skills. Children gain tremendous benefits from listening to a variety of music, stories, rhymes, and poems. Teachers can help by making it a cozy and comfortable setting.

Children have a very keen sense of smell. The scent of fresh ground coffee, pine needles, sawdust, or cinnamon present children with an olfactory challenge that helps them learn about the world around them. Cooking and tasting are also rich sensory experiences for children.



And don't forget about the wood-working area! Some children are holistic learners, who thrive on hands-on and learn-by-doing experiences. What better way to get into it than by clamping, sawing, and hammering? How rewarding to plan and execute your own design with real wood and tools. ■





# Infants and Toddlers

**The need for** infant and toddler child care is expanding rapidly. What are the special needs of these littlest ones? Above all, very young children need a warm and nurturing atmosphere and a loving teacher in order to develop. The program must allow for periods of sleep and quiet. In addition, the child's environment must be clean, safe, and supervised. We must also provide children with equipment and playthings that meet their needs.

In a child's first years her mind, body, and spirit develop most rapidly, so the play equipment we choose must encourage such development. The attitude of the teacher towards a child's development, as well as the equipment available, is crucial. How can furniture, equipment, and playthings support the caregiver in meeting these needs?

At this age the simplest playthings are generally the best. Equipment must be sturdy, thoughtfully designed, well-made, and simple to clean. Toys should be responsive to the toddler. When he pushes, the toy should move easily and correctly. If he pulls, the toy should follow.

Except when eating and sleeping, the young child is very much on the move. There should be equipment for climbing, pushing, pulling, rocking, riding—all involving the big muscles. Low lofts accessed by stairs and ramps

send irresistible challenges to young crawlers and toddlers. Toys that give practice in walking and balance are very important.

Wheeled toys are crucial—channeling the toddler's need for continuous legwork, and total body coordination. Kiddie cars, big trucks, and any vehicles which move easily and smoothly are in great demand. There should be enough toys available of suitable size.

Toddlers have a great urge to move piles of items and to gather, dump, carry, refill, stack, and knock down. They love to put things into other things, to put pegs into holes, to fasten things. Among the many fine manipulative toys for developing motor coordination are unit and mini hollow blocks.

Toddlers learn through their senses. They need a variety of materials to touch and feel: paper, cloth, soft toys, wood, sand, water, grass, play dough, and rocks—to name a few.

Solitary and parallel play is typical of the toddler. Enough variety of playthings and an adequate quantity of items are needed to allow them to play without unnecessary conflict. As the child grows older parallel play develops into cooperative play.

Chairs, tables, and storage furniture should be toddler size. Chairs should allow good posture with feet on the floor, and be able to be pushed or carried by the

toddler. The wobbly toddler needs a chair that is broad at the base. Tables should be firm and stable with heavily rounded corners.

Toddlers quickly learn where things belong. Though she will spend hours happily scattering toys, she has great pleasure in finding her favorite truck or doll in a designated place where she can get it herself. Adequate, reachable, and labeled (with a picture) storage space is vital for orderliness. Further storage space above the children's reach is also needed, for items used only at the teacher's direction. ■

**“...babies need to repeat motor movements again and again. Movement sends messages to the developing brain to strengthen the connections between neurons. ...Teachers must provide numerous opportunities for infants to practice motor skills every day. They are the foundation upon which crucial skills and abilities grow.”** Kay Albrecht



# Environment

**In addition to being** well-ordered, healthy, and safe, the whole environment of the child care center must be pleasant and supportive for both staff and children. Children should be surrounded with beauty. Color, lighting, acoustics, balance of hard and soft surfaces, music, plants, organization of supplies, activity areas—all need to be carefully considered.

Anita Olds maintains that educators should consider five defining attributes when creating activity areas: the physical location, the defining boundaries, sitting and working surfaces, the storage of materials, and the mood. Each area,

**“We must ask ourselves what values we want to communicate through learning environments, and how we want children to experience their time in our program. . . . How are we demonstrating that we respect and treasure childhood and the identity of particular children and their families?”** **Margie Carter**

just like each room, needs to have a personality distinguishing it from contiguous spaces.

A well designed room allows children to choose from a variety of clearly defined and well-equipped activity areas. This supports decision-making, encourages involvement, and promotes independence.

Children also need security. As they spend more and more time away from home, the child care center must provide homelike, secure surroundings. Cozy, soft places where they can curl up alone or with a friend or teacher are invaluable. Arrange your furniture to enclose such private corners, without sacrificing visibility for supervision. Your own childhood memories will inspire you. Where were your “special places”?

Furniture for your child care center should fit the individual child and must be safe for the heavy use it will receive. Choose products made of durable, natural materials with a variety of textures. Wood is warm and friendly to the touch and the variety of wood grain patterns and

colors add welcome visual variety, as well as learning opportunities.

Since your initial investment must last for years, it is important that your furniture is durable and can be easily refinished and repaired when needed.

Chairs should be stable and allow children to sit with their feet flat on the floor. Chairs that stack easily save valuable floor space when not in use. Choose table heights to match chair sizes.

Cubbies provide necessary individual storage space. Well-designed units will also encourage communication between parents and teachers and ease critical transitions at drop-off and pick-up times.

Equipment and materials should have their own designated place to be stored when not in use. An important part of the play experience is learning to put things away. Ample storage shelves, carts, book display and storage, and tote box units encourage orderly cleaning up.



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## Suggested Reading

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“ Play is a major mode for learning in early childhood. Furthermore, it is the primary tool through which children explore their interests, express their joys, and process their fears, disappointments, and sorrows. ”

Ed Miller, Alliance for Childhood

## Resources

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Twelve respected educators including Nancy Rosenow, Elizabeth Goodenough, and Rusty Keeler convey why nature is vital to every child's creative, social, and intellectual development.



### **The Wisdom of Play** How Children Learn to Make Sense of the World

Read what prominent educators such as David Elkind, Stuart Brown, and Joan Almon have to say about play.



### **Infant and Toddler Spaces** Design for a quality classroom

Design your own infant and toddler room with these guidelines for developmentally appropriate spaces.



### **Pre-K Spaces** Design for a quality classroom

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### **Foundations**

#### **The Value of Unit Block Play**

This instructive video illustrates the value of unit block play for young children. (30 min)



### **Spaces for Children**

Spaces for Children takes you on a virtual tour of 8 unique centers, featuring interviews with the center directors. (15 min)



### **Community Playthings Catalog**

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