

Teacher-Child Play Interactions to Promote Learning and Development



Play has long been viewed as essential for early learning and development. How teachers interact with children when they are playing may one of the most important elements of a high quality preschool program. Researchers at the Center for Early Childhood Education have conducted a series studies to guide teachers in how to interact with children in play to promote positive outcomes.

What is a “Good-Fit” Play Interaction?

In four different studies, researchers examined the effects of “good fit” interactions. What are these? Influenced by the work of Lev Vygotsky, these are methods of guiding children in ways that give them just the right support they need to play independently and in complex ways. When children are playing positively with peers, and they talk, pretend, build, move, and think, the best thing for teachers to do is simply observe and not intervene. If a child in play is struggling with an insurmountable problem in play—say, a puzzle that has too many pieces—teachers should give fairly direct guidance. They might actually put several pieces of the puzzle in place to help the child get started. When children learn most, however, is when they only need a little bit of help from an adult to play independently and in more elaborate ways. In this case, a good-fit interaction would involve asking an open-ended question, giving a brief hint, or offering a new play prop to indirectly guide play.

Studies on Good-Fit Interactions

Do these interactions work? Researchers at the Center have confirmed that they do. They videorecorded natural teacher-child interactions during play in a variety of classrooms and studied their impact on various areas of development. In one study, they found that children’s play became more independent and sustained when their teachers

used more good-fit interactions in play. In a second investigation, good-fit interactions were found to promote early math learning at the end of a year of preschool. Findings of a third study were similar. Good-fit interactions promoted growth in children’s vocabulary. In a fourth study, teachers who had bachelor’s or master’s degrees were more likely to initiate good-fit interactions. They indicated that their college classes helped them to carefully observe and interpret children’s behavior, which allowed them to provide just the right amount of support in play.

Implications for Classroom Practice

Effectively interacting with children in play requires observation, reflection, and knowledge about children’s development. In short, it needs to be intentional. The following are suggestions for teachers on ways they can provide good-fit play interactions in their classrooms:

1. **Observe first.** Prior to interacting with children in play, carefully observe what they are currently doing and reflect what, if any kinds of support they need. Avoid just “jumping into” play without purpose, regardless of how pleasant that can be.
2. **Build a repertoire of play interactions.** Learn different methods for interacting in play that can be used in different play situations. Practice asking open-ended questions in dramatic play, modeling the use of a materials in the art center, using rich new vocabulary in the book center, or engaging in math talk in blocks.
3. **Learn more about how children play.** Read books and articles and attend conferences about play and its variations across culture. Become familiar with the play needs of children with disabilities.
4. **Study your own play interactions.** Journal or record video footage of your own interactions with children during free play. View these and reflect on your interactions and their outcomes. What was successful and why? Where could you improve your interactions to better meet children’s play needs?

References

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