



To Get Ready for School: Play!

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We hear a lot about how important it is to get young children ready for school. Some child care teachers and providers feel pressured to use work sheets, flash cards, and other “school” methods to make sure children enter kindergarten prepared. But for young children, these methods are not the best way to learn – and they can even be harmful, if they make children feel that learning is difficult or boring. Young children actually learn best by doing what they do naturally: play.

Kindergarten teachers and researchers say the most important qualities children need to succeed in school are:

- eagerness to learn and confidence in their ability to learn.
- ability and willingness to cooperate with teachers and other children.
- thinking and verbal skills.

Play helps children develop all those qualities – and is also the best context for introducing knowledge about letters, numbers, colors, etc. That’s because children learn best through activities they enjoy and are engaged in.



ENCOURAGE DRAMATIC PLAY AND STORYTELLING

When children act out scenes in the housekeeping corner or make puppets “talk,” they are gaining valuable practice in the use of language – the key skill that helps them learn to read and write. Stories and dramatic play also get children used to the idea of a sequence of events, important for understanding literature and social studies.

PROVIDE BLOCKS, SAND, WATER, AND OTHER SIMPLE MATERIALS

As children experiment with building, pouring, and counting, they are developing their skills with logic and their understanding of shape, size, quantity, comparison, and cause-and-effect: the building blocks of mathematics and science. They are also developing confidence in their ability to figure things out.

PROMOTE IMAGINATIVE PLAY

When children pretend that a block is a car or a Frisbee is a hat, they are developing an important pre-academic skill: using one thing to represent another. Practice in doing this gets them ready to understand that letters represent sounds and numbers represent quantities. It also gets them ready to use their imagination to visualize historic events or scientific ideas. You can supply simple materials like blocks and housekeeping items that stimulate their imagination, and play along with children when they pretend.

PROVIDE A VARIETY OF ART ACTIVITIES

Experimenting with a variety of art materials fosters children’s imagination and aesthetic appreciation. You can provide some general ideas or inspiration to get them going, but don’t give them too much instruction or pre-cut or pre-drawn projects – children need the experience of developing their own ideas through art. You can also use art to promote oral language development by asking children to tell you about what they have made. If you write what they say on their picture, they can see their own words written down – a great motivator for interest and skill in reading.

USE SONGS TO TEACH

Activity songs help children learn concepts, remember sequences, exercise imagination, and develop language skills. Many songs – including songs in other languages – help children learn new vocabulary.



HELP DEVELOP SOCIAL SKILLS

Play is an important way for children to develop emotional and social skills. When they negotiate roles in dramatic play, rules for an outdoor game, or ways to cooperate in building with blocks, they are practicing some of the most important skills that contribute to school success. They’re motivated to resolve the problems because they want the play to continue. Of course they often get into conflicts! Those provide you with important “teachable moments” for guiding them in developing cooperation skills.

ENCOURAGE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Make sure children have time and space to move around and practice skills like running, jumping, climbing, dancing, and throwing balls. Research shows that children learn better when they have plenty of opportunity to be physically active. Especially for young children, their bodies and minds are connected – developing physical skills and coordination promotes brain development.

FOSTER NATURAL LOVE OF LEARNING

Children are born curious about the world around them, eager to explore. We can take advantage of and extend that natural love of learning by providing a variety of activity areas that appeal to children (blocks, housekeeping corner, science, reading, painting and drawing, etc.) and letting them choose their own activities.

DEVELOP THINKING AND LANGUAGE SKILLS

Children get the most out of play when adults are actively involved to extend the learning:

Asking questions: “You’re driving a car? Where’s the car going? What do you see along the way?”

Making observations that reinforce concepts: “You’ve lined up those animals in order of their size – let’s count and see how many you have.”

Making suggestions: “What would happen if you mixed red and blue together?”

TO LEARN MORE:

4Cs offers workshops on many topics, including curriculum ideas that encourage learning through play.

See our training calendar at www.4calameda.org