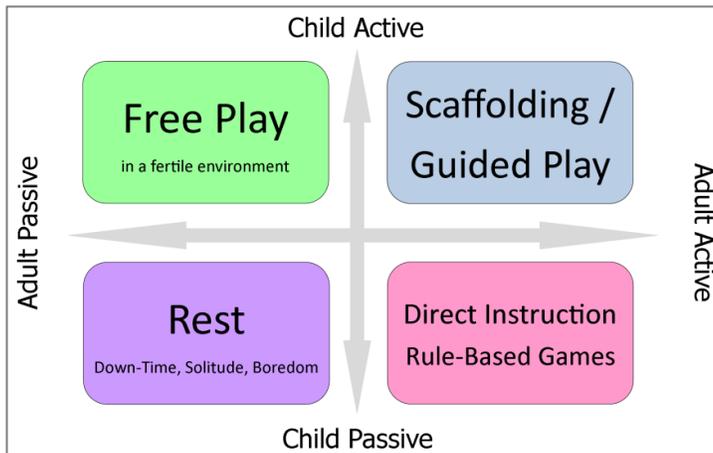


Four Opportunities for Learning

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A balance of activities helps a child to learn.

Direct instruction: This is what we think of when we talk about “teaching” a child. When a parent, teacher or book “teaches” a child, we are adding information to their database – their *crystallized intelligence*.

This is the most effective way to teach specific bits of information (“that animal is called a giraffe”) and to teach specific skills like tying shoes. It includes teaching rules of a new game or teaching the words of a song.

During direct instruction, the adult makes the plan and actively leads the learning. The child is a passive recipient. Parents just naturally spend part of each day teaching their children, but you shouldn’t be pressured by feeling like you have to be on teaching duty every minute of every day.

Free Play: On the opposite corner, you’ll see Free Play, where the child is active – the child is deciding what to play, how to play, and how long to do it. It is fun and spontaneous, and the point is enjoying the process of play, not worrying about creating an end product. This could be playing with toys, splashing in puddles, playing on a playground, etc. The parent may play along, following the child’s lead, but more often the parent may be doing something completely different while the child plays.

When a child has a chance for hands-on self-guided play, they build *fluid intelligence*. This allows them to adapt information and skills they’ve learned to new situations. Play requires problem-solving, as they discover that to take their play to the next step, they need to figure out something new.

Modern U.S. children spend more time in structured learning with direct instruction than most other children throughout cultures and history. Lots of children go from school to dance class to tutoring to gymnastics... with little time to “waste” in free play in between. But it is during free play that they really learn to apply and adapt and take ownership of all the things they learn in those classes.

Guided Play: Guided Play is the middle ground. With young children, it often happens when you’re playing alongside a child. For example, if they’re playing with blocks, you could sit next to them and play with blocks too. Every once and a while, you can give them a suggestion for what else they could do with the blocks, or you could model some new thing and see if they notice and follow you. Or you could ask questions like “what do you think will happen if...” to take learning to a new level.

Rest: Oftentimes, parents forget an essential component of learning: down time. Kids need a chance to process and incorporate all the information from their new experiences. A more extroverted child might process by talking to others. Then sleep allows their brain connections to build. A more introverted child might need solitude – a chance to be alone for some period of every day to absorb everything. Don’t feel guilty when you’re not “doing anything” with your child. We all need some time to putter around on our own without having to do what someone else is asking us to do.

Play-Based Learning

Parents can create an environment and schedule that promotes learning. Having a predictable routine and a (reasonably) tidy home with consistent rules and nurturing caregivers creates a sense of safety which allows the child to be open to learning. The parent can choose what materials to have available. There's no need to fill the house with expensive toys. Simple open-ended toys are plenty for children's development. Having too many toys can actually overstimulate the child and make it hard to settle down long enough to play with any of them.

One approach to learning would be to set out an "invitation to play" which mixes familiar objects and activities (for repetition and mastery) with novel objects and activities to explore. For example, if your child loves playing in the bathtub but is bored of their bath toys, you might take the colander or an egg beater from the kitchen into the bath. If your child has stopped playing with their blocks, put toy animals with the blocks, read a story about a zoo, then suggest they might build a zoo. If your child has been drawing and gluing items onto paper, give them a three dimensional object (like a box) to draw on, and to try gluing things on a vertical surface.

Another approach is "scaffolding." When a child has mastered something and is ready to move to the next level, an adult can help them get there simply by giving a small hint, asking a leading question, modelling a skill, or adapting the materials or activities then letting the child continue to play. If they've figured out how to build a tower with blocks but it keeps falling over, teach them how to make it more stable. Then play side-by-side for a while as they practice that new skill, then step away to let them explore it more. Once they've mastered that, teach them how to build walls. And someday add on how to build a roof. No need to rush them along, but when they're ready for a challenge, you can offer a gentle nudge in that direction.

Another approach is child-led play. Ask them open-ended questions like "what are we going to do next?" Let them lead the way, and you follow along. You can copy what they're doing. They put a toy on the shelf, you put the toy on a shelf. You can narrate what they're doing as they play. "You poured the water. Now you're scooping the water." You can show them a new idea to try, but it's up to them whether they try it. Try practicing a "serve and return" method – they roll the ball to you, you roll the ball back. Stretch the play. If over and over they've given you the toy pizza and you've pretended to eat it, ask them for an apple.

Benefits of Free Play and Guided Play – Kids who learn by playing gain:

- *Physical competence.* Free play allows a child to practice new skills till they are mastered.
- *Self-direction.* The child gets to make decisions, make plans, and see them through.
- *Creativity.* Experiments show that children who are taught "the right way" to use a toy will use it in limited ways. Kids who are allowed to freely explore a toy develop many more creative uses.
- *Problem-solving.* When a child creates her own plan for play, she doesn't foresee challenges that will come up that an adult might see. When problems arise, it offers lots of chances for problem-solving.
- *Language skills.* Play requires asking and answering questions, giving commands and acting on them, and explaining your goals to the person you are playing with.
- *Conflict resolution skills.* There's lots of negotiation that goes on in cooperative play.
- *Emotional intelligence.* Dramatic play helps children understand emotions, learn how to express emotions, and distinguish between real emotions and "pretend" emotions.
- *Symbolic play.* If a child can use a stick to simulate an ice cream cone, it helps her later understand that numbers on a page represent how many objects they have, and that letters represent sounds, and musical notes on a page indicate where to place her fingers.
- *Better memory.* Kids are motivated to remember things they need to know for a play scenario.
- *Reduced stress.* Play is fun. Children play when they feel safe. We are all more capable of learning new things when we are having fun and feeling safe.

Resources: Brain Rules for Babies, by John Medina. www.naeyc.org/play and www.zerotothree.org/child-development/play/
Videos: What About Play: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XY8jQ28D3yI>; Play is Children's Work www.youtube.com/watch?v=FR5pO_85fMk. Importance of Play www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_-1O_rBLPU