

Be a Responsive Facilitator of Learning

A facilitator of children's learning organizes experiences, encourages curiosity and discovery, and scaffolds children's learning. Think of yourself as a responsive, warm, creative guide who

- › Is emotionally available to children
- › Gives children wholehearted and kindly attention (sometimes just by your presence)
- › Creates possibilities for learning that are age, individually, and culturally appropriate and effective
- › Provides ample time for infants and toddlers to explore their environments each day, making choices, and building their initiative and motivation to learn
- › Observes thoughtfully while an infant or toddler explores a toy, noticing a child's goals and strategies, and not interrupting a child's engaged problem solving
- › Observes children's interests and goals (e.g., how different materials sound when dropped) and changes your interactions with them and the environment as needed to spark learning and curiosity
- › Warmly *responds* when a child wants or needs you, looks at you, verbalizes to you, or needs you to be close
- › Engages in rich language conversations with infants and toddlers and gives them time to respond
- › Uses language to describe what children are doing (parallel talk) and what you are doing (self-talk)
- › Wonders with children as they play or as you read a book
- › Supports (scaffolds) learning by helping children learn strategies before they become frustrated
- › Facilitates just enough to help the child feel confident enough to try again
- › Encourages a child's effort by offering comments such as "You are working so hard to turn the pages of the book! You can see each baby animal."

You are an educator who is *response-able* (Cheeseman 2017). This means that you are ready to respond when infants and toddlers initiate an exchange. For example, if a toddler holds out a plastic fruit for you to see, you might respond in one of the following ways, depending on your knowledge of the child:

- › Smile and provide the name of the fruit: "I see! You have an apple."
- › Talk about what the child was doing with the fruit—shaking, banging, making noise, trying to make it do something, or pretending to eat or cook with it.
- › Describe the fruit—for example, its color, shape, size, or length.
- › Suggest something the child might do with the fruit.
- › Say, "What would you like to do with the apple?"



Understand the Importance of Play

Play is the way children learn (Gillespie 2016). The commonly heard saying that “play is children’s work” highlights the importance of taking play seriously. Imaginative, creative, purposeful, problem-solving play indeed is one of the most important avenues through which children learn (Luckenbill, Subramaniam, & Thompson 2019).

As Jung & Recchia (2013) explain, “Because what motivates infant play is the pure joy of mastering objects and actions, play is viewed not as a means to an end but as an end itself. In play, infants interact with their environment, absorbing new information, solving problems, acquiring actions, and learning to adapt to the world” (829–30).

Nell and Drew (n.d.) write about five essentials of meaningful play:

1. Children make their own decisions.
2. Children are intrinsically motivated.
3. Children become immersed in the moment.
4. Play is spontaneous, not scripted.
5. Play is enjoyable.

The impulse to play comes from a natural desire to understand the world. This play impulse is as strong as a child’s desire for food or sleep (Nell & Drew n.d.).

To support infants' and toddlers' learning, follow the children's lead for what they need, as Carolee does:

Shawna (8 months) pulls a toy piano off a low shelf in her infant room. She pushes one key and a sound emerges. Surprised, Shawna pushes the key again. Smiling, she pushes another key. Shawna's teacher, Carolee, moves in closer to observe. When Shawna looks up at Carolee, the teacher says enthusiastically, "You pushed a key! You made music."

Carolee thoughtfully follows Shawna's lead during play. Carolee places the piano on a low shelf where Shawna can easily see and reach it. The teacher knows that an 8-month-old can easily push a large piano key to make a sound. Carolee observes and sees that Shawna is experimenting with cause and effect. Shawna discovers that she causes the effect—the sounds—and repeats the movement. The teacher does not show her how to do it. Instead, Carolee observes while Shawna explores the toy, and when the time is right—when Shawna invites her into the play by looking at her—Carolee says enthusiastically, "You made music."

Provide Time for Exploration

Play requires time. Play involves children choosing their activities in an enriched environment that you create. In some toddler classrooms, the children stay together all morning and move from activity to activity together as a group. Observe what can happen when young children cannot make choices and do not have uninterrupted time to explore what interests them:

After the toddlers eat a snack together, the teachers take them all to a puzzle table. Time is limited. Some toddlers want to explore the puzzles longer, but it's time to move to the next station. One child is very distressed at leaving his puzzle unfinished. The teachers move all the toddlers to two water tables, where they have 15 minutes to explore the properties of the water. Some toddlers are tired and out of sorts by this time and start to cry. The teachers tell the toddlers to get their coats and line up to go outside. Some are so eager to go outside that they plow ahead, and the teachers scold them. Finally, everyone is outside and there are just 15 minutes to play before it is time for lunch.

Compare the scenario above with the one below. In which room would you feel your needs would be better met if you were a toddler? In which room would you prefer to be as a teacher?

Sara, a young toddler, finishes her snack with the other toddlers. The teacher helps her wash her hands and says, "What would you like to play with today? We have blocks and sand and other toys," as she points to each choice.

Sara immediately heads for the blocks. She sees the new sticky blocks and tries to bang two of them together. They stick! Sara was not expecting that. She experiments with the blocks for 15 minutes before going off to find her friend Sam. She pulls on his arm to come to the storybook area where there are low chairs and couches, a rug, and some pillows. The books are displayed so that the children can easily see the covers and choose a favorite book to look at.

Sara first tries a well-established schema or way to handle blocks. She is surprised by the unexpected outcome. This causes her to explore the blocks with great interest; she is learning about the different properties of objects. When she tires of the blocks, she wants her friend to join her in another activity. Because the toddlers in this room are encouraged to make choices about what they will do, Sara has learned that she can invite another child to join her in her play.

In Sara's room the teacher thoughtfully arranges interesting materials, including some that Sara and the other toddlers have not experienced before. These materials spark Sara's interest and challenge her thinking. The teacher gives children the gift of time to explore, quench their curiosity, and learn. The teachers also observe and facilitate children's engaged and enthusiastic learning through play.

Scaffold Children's Learning

Adults play a significant role in helping young children learn and enjoy learning (Bruner 1978), and scaffolding is an important part of this practice. "Scaffolding allows children to solve a problem or carry out a task that is beyond their current abilities. It is a bridge teachers create to connect existing knowledge to new knowledge and understanding" (Gillespie & Greenberg 2017, 90). When you encourage a child's efforts or persistence, expand on her language, give her a hint or suggestion to try, or help her focus (Klein & Feldman 2007), you are scaffolding that child's learning.

In Chapter 6, scaffolding was discussed as a strategy to support young children's cognitive development. However, scaffolding also includes emotional support. Teachers scaffold emotional development and cognitive learning when, for example, they play peekaboo with infants and young toddlers. During this activity, the teacher models and adjusts her movements, words, and facial expressions to engage in a beautifully choreographed, synchronized dance with the children (Jung & Recchia 2013). The adult "stimulates learning through play but also encourages their [infants'] active participation" (Jung & Recchia 2013, 832). When infants initiate a game of peekaboo after many instances of responding to your initiations, you know that you have empowered them to play and learn with you. Caring relationships form as you and the infants share the joy of interacting.

Dance the Developmental Ladder

The term *dance the developmental ladder* describes how teachers notice whether an activity is too easy or difficult for a child and then adjust their strategies to the developmental level of the child (Honig 1982). This is a form of scaffolding. Here are several examples of how one teacher dances the developmental ladder.

When Antonio's teacher Tammi notices that he had a trying time holding regular crayons, Tammi dances down the developmental ladder. She finds crayons that are easy for Antonio to handle with a hammer grip. Antonio feels successful when using his new crayons. When Tammi observes that Cecelia is becoming bored with 10-piece puzzles, Tammi dances up the developmental ladder and offers puzzles that are more challenging. To help Cecelia with the more challenging activity, Tammi reminds Cecelia about the strategies she used with the easier puzzles. Cecelia uses many of the same techniques to finish the more challenging puzzles.