The teacher’s role in supporting child-directed play

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Early childhood educators know that play is a critical component of healthy child development. Through play, children explore their world, try on new roles, solve problems, and express themselves. One type of play that is especially important to development from early infancy through to the end of the early childhood period is unstructured, child-directed play (Ginsburg, 2007). Child-directed play is similar to free play but includes more adult engagement. This kind of play may be facilitated by an adult, but is still totally under the child’s direction and control. In an early childhood environment that is increasingly academic-centered and skill-based, this type of play may be on the decline, as many programs focus on more structured activities aimed at enhancing early literacy and numeracy skills. In response to increasing evidence of negative consequences for children because of this omission (Gray, 2011), this article offers support for teachers in maintaining child-directed play in their programs by suggesting specific strategies to try across the early childhood period. The article also provides appropriate strategies for each age and stage of the early childhood period.

Beyond expanding skills in supporting child-directed play outside of setting up the physical environment, planning children’s learning experiences, and observing children to learn more about their individual developmental needs, the early childhood teacher’s role also includes cultivating an understanding of what child-directed play is and the important role adults play in supporting it. Paired with this developmental knowledge, easy-to-adopt strategies offered here can increase and encourage self-directed play in the early childhood setting. Many of these skills may also be helpful for caregiving adults in the family setting.

Child-directed play in infancy

Five-month-old Ava is laying on her back in her classroom’s play area. Her teacher, Miss Noor, is sitting nearby and notices that Ava is gazing at her face. She says, “Hello, Ava! I see your eyes!” Ava responds by kicking her feet and cooing loudly. Miss Noor moves closer, asking, “Do you want me to pick you up?” Ava squeals and smiles, waving her hands in Miss Noor’s direction. Miss Noor pulls Ava onto her lap, facing the baby towards her. Ava coos and babbles happily and Miss Noor responds in similar tones, gazing warmly into Ava’s eyes and offering Ava her fingers to hold. When Ava begins to arch her back and look away, Miss Noor says, “I think you are ready for a break from this game. I wonder if you’re getting hungry?” She shifts Ava into an outward-facing hold and the baby relaxes in her caregiver’s arms, gazing around the room as Miss Noor prepares her bottle.

In infancy, child-directed play is directed by two innate developmental drives. The first is finding ways to communicate needs to caregiving adults, predominantly through nonverbal cues or crying out to communicate discomfort, hunger, or the need for holding or repositioning. The second is mastering motor skills to allow deliberate movement and control over their bodies. Babies’ earliest self-directed play often involves learning how to bring their hands or feet to their mouths, moving their arms and legs, exploring their bodies to discover interesting or soothing sensations, or reaching for items in the environment to manipulate and explore with their hands and mouths.

Soon, play begins to centre on intentional communication skills, as infants learn to control the sounds they make and use those sounds to engage and interact with other people. Adults often initiate the serve-and-return aspect of early verbalisations, as babies coo, squawk, screech, or babble and attentive adults respond in kind. This particular
interactive strategy has strong connections to healthy brain development during this important period and is widely encouraged as a frequent behaviour for all adults who interact with infants (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, n.d.). Such interactions serve as an intensely pleasant connection as well as practice for future communication. When this kind of play is reciprocal, it engages adults as much as it does babies!

Supporting healthy development through child-directed play in infancy starts with attention and time from educators. In order to support child-directed play, teachers must get to know babies well, individualising their own emotional and physical responses to each child’s temperament, as well as to their unique physiological needs. For example, some babies enjoy lots of face-to-face interaction, while others prefer to be held facing outward, taking in all the data that the world around them provides. Some infants need swaddling to fall asleep, while some babies want to wiggle and fidget to sleep all by themselves. Paying close attention to these individual cues can help teachers know when to facilitate child-directed play with babies and when to give children space and time to focus their attention on what interests them without the undivided attention of their favorite caregivers.

Babies’ love of repetition typically makes supporting child-directed play fairly easy, and research shows that this drive has developmental benefits, as infants learn by doing things over and over again and through exploring and practicing motor and verbal skills (Newman, Rowe, & Ratner, 2016). As they age, babies are usually interested in being watched, getting reactions, and engaging with adults who are facilitating self-directed play. When supportive teachers embrace this interest, watch and comment, and change their facial expressions to communicate their interest and attention to what is going on, infants are likely to continue to engage with others and explore while they master their own bodies.

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<td>Return serves from infants; modify facial and verbal responses to match the child’s expressions and vocalizations; observe carefully to match responses, individualise responses</td>
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Self-directed play in toddlerhood

Sam and his favorite friend Kaia, both two-and-a-half years old, are building with large cardboard blocks in the construction centre. Kaia stacks them one on top of the other, telling Sam, “BIG BIG!” Sam says, “Mine is high!”, pointing to his own structure and adding another block. Their teacher, Mr Kaito, steps into the area carrying extra blocks he retrieved from the storage closet when he noticed how interested the two children were in this project today. He crouches down with the new blocks and begins to build a structure of his own, saying, “I’m putting this red block on top of the green block. I’m going to build a garage for this truck.” Sam and Kaia are immediately interested in Mr Kaito’s structure, adding blocks of their own and instructing him to make it “really, REALLY big!” As Sam and Kaia take over the new structure, Mr Kaito sits back, encouraging them to try out their own ideas, describing what he sees each child doing, and occasionally adding a block of his own.

In the toddler years, child-directed play centres on creative exploration of both the external, physical world and the internal world of thought and imagination. Toddlers are not constrained by adult rules about how the world works; instead they come up with their own novel ideas about how they can make things happen. Emerging language skills increase their problem-solving abilities, as well as their abilities to express and explore new ideas that interest them.

Children in this stage are just beginning to learn to play with each other, with parallel play (side by side with similar materials) dominating much of their time with peers. For example, the cooperative skills for building a single block structure together might be just emerging for children in this age group, but two children might spend a surprising
amount of time building towers next to each other, perhaps even comparing their creations, borrowing ideas as they observe each other or showing emotional responses to each other while they play.

Teachers can support child-directed play in toddlerhood by providing long stretches of uninterrupted time for children to explore their ideas and practice them on their own and with peers in a well-planned, safe environment, both indoors and outdoors. Children this age also love when adults join in or watch them play, listening carefully for their cues about when to join in and when to just observe instead. When teachers follow children’s lead in their self-directed play, for example, holding the baby doll when it is offered or getting more wooden blocks when children’s constructions use up what was available, they are facilitating self-directed play.

The same serve-and-return interactions loved by infants continue to thrill toddlers. When teachers respond to children’s verbal and nonverbal cues by narrating and describing what is going on in their play without interpreting or directing it, they contribute to children’s exploding language skills, introducing new and interesting words as they describe what they see. When children hear teachers talking about what they are doing and describing their interactions with each other, they learn about how their play behavior impacts their playmates and their interactions. This kind of talk can also suggest ideas about ways to play the children have not yet explored. Further, this type of teacher talk strengthens the teacher-child relationship, letting children know they are seen and appreciated for who they are by an important adult in their lives.

### Interactive strategies

| Provide long periods of uninterrupted time for child-directed play; support emerging social skills; join in play, watching and narrating play as it unfolds |

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**Self-directed play in the preschool and early school age years**

*Miss Ana is outside with her class of five-year-olds. It is a particularly lovely day, so she has planned to spend most of the morning outdoors. Yesterday, there was some conflict between children who wanted to race toy vehicles on the sidewalk, so today she meets the children who want to play this racing game again in front of the toy storage area. She says, “Yesterday, children were driving their vehicles everywhere and there were lots of crashes! I wonder what we could do today instead?” Leila says, “We need a plan to go the same way!” Two other children chime in, “Yeah!” Miss Ana says, “I think that might work. I brought out chalkboards so children can make signs with arrows. Who wants to be in charge of signs today?” Ari raises his hand, jumping up and down, shouting, “Me, me!” Miss Ana says, “Ari, you look very excited about signs! Can you pick some helpers to make them so the job gets done quickly and you can all play?” The interested children quickly get to work designing signs with arrows and distributing them around the area they have designated as “the road.” When the sign-making is complete, several other children decide to join in the racing game. Without all the crashes, they are able to stay involved in the game for the entire outdoor period, giving Miss Ana a chance to document their work with photographs to share with their families later.**

In the preschool and early school age years, child-directed play becomes more sophisticated and language-based. It also requires less involvement of teachers as children design and implement their own play ideas. Children begin to make up structured games on their own, with individual children playing negotiated roles in them (that is when playing house, children decide who will be the mummy, the sister, and even the pet cat). Plan-making also emerges during this period, and children benefit from having both the time and space to create games and projects that span over several days.

A common refrain for children this age is “Watch me!”, as they love to have teachers watch and respond to their ideas and notice their developing skills. Teachers can support self-directed play by saying yes! Watching children as
they play and using non-judgmental language to let children know that they are seen is a key strategy to support child-directed play. When teachers remove their own opinions about a child’s activities, they give children space for self-evaluation and independent thought. (Stegelin, Fite & Wisneski, 2015). Other ways teachers can support children’s development through child-directed play in the preschool years include providing support and opportunities to sustain play over time, encouraging plan-making facilitating social problem-solving when challenges arise, and providing expansion to children’s play ideas (for example, by adding materials or suggesting new themes to include).

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<td>• “You are jumping!” instead of “Great job!”</td>
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<td>• “You built a structure that is almost as tall as you are!” instead of “What a great tower!”</td>
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<td>• “I see many colors in your painting.” instead of “Beautiful painting!”</td>
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<td>• “You worked on that project all morning.” instead of “Good work!”</td>
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Creating structured time for child-directed play

Throughout the early childhood period, a particular kind of teacher participation is key for supporting development. The authors of this article recommend a technique that focuses on supporting and enhancing the teacher-child relationship through child-directed play in a planned, predictable context (Forrester & Albrecht, 2014). Working with children individually or in carefully selected dyads or triads, teachers invite children to join them in play with a few selected toys and materials in a designated area of the classroom. During this special playtime with the teacher, ideally planned for at least twenty minutes a week per child or small group, adults explicitly encourage children to lead in play, with the adult in the role of assistant. While basic classroom rules stay in place, there are no other special guidelines implemented during this time and all directed teaching agendas are set aside. Children benefit from the powerful experience of being in control while an important person in their lives watches, and teachers benefit from the opportunity to observe and learn about children in this child-controlled setting. All parties benefit from a stronger relationship that can serve as an anchor for children as they explore the world around them and take risks that can lead to learning.

In conclusion, child-directed play in early childhood helps young children develop critical skills that are essential for healthy development and later school success. When children play without adult instruction, they may learn to solve problems, build and expand language skills, create solutions to challenges, and develop the persistence and focus needed for later academic activities and for life (Education Gazette, 2019). Research confirms that “play is not just about having fun but about taking risks, experimenting, and testing boundaries” (Yogman, Garner, Hutchinson, Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2018, p. 2). These skills begin to emerge in early infancy, and parents and teachers play an important role in supporting them. Supporting child-directed play is a key teacher role, but it is also one that has the potential to ease a teacher’s busy day, allowing both children and adults to attend to what interests children most and creating opportunities both for learning and relationship building.
References


