



**Playful learning  
combines open-  
ended experiences,  
child-directed  
initiatives, and  
teacher-guided  
activities.**

# Observing, Planning, Guiding: How an Intentional Teacher Meets Standards through Play



National Association for the  
Education of Young Children



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## How an Intentional Teacher Meets Standards through Play

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**Patricia McDonald**

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It is early in the day. Kris, one of my 22 kindergartners, is sharing her journal entry and drawing with me. After our talk, she walks to the carpet to play. She observes a group of children who have discovered that the magnifying glasses we used during this morning's math lesson enlarge words found throughout the room. She then joins a group that is building a house out of blocks, carefully balancing different shapes on top of each other. After about 30 minutes, I announce it's time for morning meeting. The class responds with, "Awwww! Can't we keep playing?"



In my kindergarten classroom, I strive to provide an engaging environment where play is the prominent support for and means of learning. But in truth, I find it challenging. Earlier in my career, I used a didactic approach full of worksheets and drills because it was “expected.” While I see small amounts of direct instruction as useful, I also know that play-based learning is essential for young children. Play encompasses knowledge building, problem solving, communicating, and collaborating; yet throughout my career I’ve often felt that the field is gently nudging me toward focusing on “skills and drills.” Even after 23 years as a teacher, I feel torn between ensuring the children achieve certain benchmarks at certain times and offering a more child-centered education that creates opportunities for exploration.

The current educational emphasis on standards and high-stakes assessments places tremendous pressure on teachers and children, leading to “potentially problematic teaching practices” (NAEYC 2009, 4). Considering the long lists of specific objectives that must be accomplished by the end of the year—usually without extended learning time or other additional resources—it is easy to understand why teachers would be skeptical about devoting their limited class time to child-centered approaches to instruction. Child-directed, playful learning is often less efficient than teacher-directed learning; but if we value healthy child development, we must find a balance in our classrooms (Hassinger-Das, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff 2017).

## The teacher’s role

Anna and Lizzy are buying items at the “grocery market,” a project the children initiated and constructed after a lesson on community. Grocery items were sorted, discount signs were made, and a checkout area was set up with bags and play money. I see an opportunity to introduce money. I walk over to Carly, the cashier, and ask, “How much are the grapes?” “Ten cents,” she replies. I hold out a handful of coins and say, “Can you help me? What coins do I need for 10 cents?” Anna says, “Look for the one that says 10 cents.” “Where do you see that?” Lizzy asks. “It’s really small,” I reply. “Let’s get the magnifying glass to see it.”

Later, we have a class discussion about the names of the coins and their characteristics,



using magnifying glasses as tools. After our conversation, the coins and magnifying glasses are put in the exploration center, where the children quickly learn that they can magnify other objects, including print.

During play, teachers are researchers, observing children to decide how to extend their learning both in the moment and by planning new play environments. They must figure out how to quietly intervene to help children connect contexts to everyday concepts and academic content, leading to further cognitive, social, and emotional development (NAEYC & NCTM [2002] 2010; Flee 2009). By strategically expanding play and asking questions that challenge children’s thinking, teachers create meaningful learning opportunities to help children draw an understanding between their observations, ideas, and judgments (Blake 2009). A mix of child-directed and guided play should be incorporated into the day. When the play environment is intentionally created, the learning that occurs is as deliberate and logical as any teacher-directed lesson, yet the activities are offered in a manner that is appropriate to the development of each child (Leong & Bodrova 2012).

In my classroom, children play every day, but I am never “just letting children play.” I am observing, guiding, and planning.

I watch with curiosity as David and Marco grab a stack of playing cards. They look tentatively at each other, then turn to me, saying, “We’re not sure what to play.” I show them a card game in which they will practice cooperation and further develop their number sense. I explain the need for a “caller” who distributes the cards and directs the other players when to flip over their top card. The player holding the card with the highest numerical value wins that round.

Anna walks over and watches. “Would you like to play?” I ask. She smiles and joins in. After we play another round, I excuse myself from the game; the players all agree to vote on who will take my place as the caller. Anna is chosen, but it isn’t long before I observe Marco throwing his cards on the floor, frustrated that Anna is telling him what to do. I remind the group about their vote, and they continue playing.

Later, when another child joins in, the same problem arises—but the children don’t need my help. Marco explains that one person needs to be the caller.

This situation reflects my many roles as a teacher (Synodi 2010). In the beginning, I was an *observer*, expecting (based on prior observations) that the two boys would likely need some help initiating play. As an *instructional leader*, I selected a game that would develop their academic and social abilities. As a *participant*, I modeled a new game and invited another child to join the group. When the first dispute occurred, I became the *mediator*, emphasizing the agreed-on rules.

## During play, teachers are researchers, observing children to decide how to extend their learning.

During play-based learning, teachers are often subtle participants or gentle guides who seek to enrich or expand on the present experience. With the card game, I was able to reinforce an important math concept (comparing number values) and support the children’s growing abilities to work with others and regulate their feelings.

In this case, setting time aside for play resulted in a teachable moment when David and Marco asked for my

help—but such opportunities do not always occur. As a teacher dedicated to providing significant amounts of playtime every day, I continually ask myself: How can I extend the play experience that I’m watching to connect it to the standards I’m required to teach?

## From theory to reality

Some may argue that play is an inappropriate means of achieving standards. I have found that children can meet and exceed standards through playful learning that combines open-ended experiences, child-directed initiatives, and teacher-guided activities. However, as simple as play may sound, I will admit that achieving a balance between accomplishing set curricular goals and sustaining a child-centered environment is more difficult than one would think (Ranz-Smith 2007). Through experience, I have learned that there are three primary factors I need to address to bring play and standards together: being intentional in crafting activities, identifying children’s developmental needs, and assessing growth.

### Intentionally crafting activities

To address specific academic standards, I sometimes introduce a concept with a whole-group activity, then establish an environment that supports further exploration during free-play time. I consciously determine the purpose and intentionality of all activities (including play), asking myself, “Do all of the materials and activities have a purpose?” It is the meaningfulness of the activities, as determined by the child, that creates a springboard for learning through curiosity and exploration (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2003).

An example of my effort to use play as a primary means of learning is a lesson in which I introduced the concept of sink or float. The weekly theme was Life in the Ocean, which prompted a child-directed discussion about boats and why they are able to float in the water. I engaged the children in making boats out of foil and seeing how many dice it took to sink their boats. I introduced how density and shape, not size, determine whether an object floats. After giving a demonstration to the whole group, I made the activity an independent center for the children to explore. I watched as they eagerly tried to make boats, which was quickly followed by piling up dice and revising their boat designs. While the beginning of the activity



was a group demonstration, it motivated the children to explore their own questions independently and to investigate and challenge their assumptions.

I am certain that the children enjoyed, and learned a great deal from, this activity—but was this an example of play? If play must be open ended, child selected, and voluntary, play did not happen until after my demonstration. The demonstration, though, sparked the children's curiosity.

### Identifying developmental needs

One of the greatest yet most challenging facets of teaching kindergarten is accepting that individual development has its own time frame. To honor individual development, teachers do their best to implement activities that are suitable for each child. Play is beneficial because it allows for more variation than many teacher-directed lessons. With children varying in their current abilities and needs cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically, having a flexible approach to teaching and learning—including lots of time for free and guided play—is essential. An illustration of how I apply this understanding is the changes I made to my classroom schedule.

Four children walk over to a puzzle on a table. They try to put the pieces together through random trial and error. Seeing that they have no strategy with which to solve the puzzle,

I initiate a conversation on how to use the shapes of the lines to connect pieces and how to look for key images to determine the overall picture. Ten minutes later the timer rings to clean up. “But we didn’t finish!” they tell me. Realizing the high-quality learning they were engaged in while playing with the puzzle (an activity that the children chose), I tell them we will have more time later in the day to finish. At lunch, I rearrange the daily schedule to offer more time for intentional choices and flexibility rather than defined and required work.



Knowing that a developmentally appropriate environment does not mean giving the children full control of the classroom, I focused on designing choices that are active and engaging. For example, I incorporated math games (including board and card games) into our morning meeting and restructured recess to allow more time for outdoor exploration (including science investigations). Materials (such as paint, tape, and musical instruments) that I previously brought out only on special occasions, I made available for the children to use at their will during open play every day.

### Assessing growth

Overall, my instructional approach is based on my knowledge of children's development and effective teaching practices. However, the direction of learning and specific activities are determined by my ongoing observation of the children's interests, abilities, and efforts. For me, assessment includes seeking evidence of children's learning and honestly reflecting on my own practice. I regularly ask myself whether I have an effective instructional plan in place and, if so, what I can expect the children's growth to look like.



In kindergarten, teachers use a variety of evaluation tools, such as portfolios, running records, anecdotal notes and narratives, and formal assessments that measure acquisition and application of skills and concepts. As I have shifted toward play-based learning and created more time for child-directed activities, I have carefully observed children's interests, efforts, and growth. Over time, I have found that the combination of observing play and conducting skill-specific assessments provides well-balanced information. Examining both, I am able to determine the direction of learning and develop activities that are appropriate, flexible, and challenging, including more free and guided play.

## Reflection

In my experience, there are times when trying to make the academic standards meaningful while guiding and extending children's interests and curiosity feels like a walk in the dark. In putting aside the safety of worksheets and trusting in the guidance provided by the children, I find myself wondering on a daily basis, What did the children gain today from being in my class? Did I miss an opportunity for learning? Did I reinforce the connection between intentionality, developmentally appropriate activities, and assessment? Based on my observation, what did they learn from playing? While my answers are almost always much richer than they were when I relied heavily on worksheets, I find that these questions are essential to my ever-increasing intentionality, and thus to the children's learning.

## Playful learning combines open-ended experiences, child-directed initiatives, and teacher-guided activities.

Although children may not fully understand the broader ideas they are exploring while playing, play provides experiences that contribute to their present knowledge and abilities that they will rely on when solving problems in the future (NAEYC & NCTM [2002] 2010). Teachers' professional knowledge of child development

directly impacts instruction and the creation of an effective play-based learning environment (NAEYC 2009). When teachers connect academic standards to play activities, they free themselves to support the overall development of children.

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## About the author

**Patricia McDonald**, PhD, is a mathematics instructional coach for an American school in Stuttgart, Germany. A kindergarten teacher when she wrote this article, she now focuses her work on assisting K–5 teachers with best practices in early childhood education and mathematics, collaborating with the community and the faculty on standards to improve learning, and advocating for play for all students. [mcdonald.patricia08@gmail.com](mailto:mcdonald.patricia08@gmail.com)

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