

A Toolbox for Engaging Children in Play and Creativity for Learning Across the Domains

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"Children are active learners from birth, constantly taking in and organizing information to create meaning through their relationships, their interactions with their environment, and their overall experiences" (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020, p. 11).

Setting the Stage: The Importance of Play and Creativity

Creating Self through Play

Look around! Children are at play (Table 1). All these playful experiences were fun! As children laughed and repeated these experiences, they were actually at work creating themselves through active play. The big kids chose their games, and the little ones followed along, gleeful, expectant. The choices children made, even from infancy, were meaningful, purposeful, and engaging. These choices set in active learning conditions are not reserved for a select few, those who 'get their work done' or some other arbitrary criteria. Optimal learning and development occur when all children engage in continual opportunities for play and creativity (NAEYC, 2019).

Study of Play and Creativity

Creativity is a spark – Play is the fuel that sets that spark ablaze.

The active study of play and creativity demonstrates the value of playful, creative learning to teachers, caregivers, and families (Bush et al., 2013; Frost et al., 2012; Gronlund & Rendon, 2015; Huizinga, 1949; Isbell & Yoshizawa, 2020; Koralek, 2005; Koralek et al., 2015; Master-son & Bohart, 2019; Murphy, 2015; NAEYC, 2014; Tok, 2021; Yates & Twigg, 2017). The study of play and creativity is international in scope as one of the rights of children. Many organizations focus on play such as NAEYC, The International Play Association (<https://ipaworld.org/>), and Clemson University, in South



Carolina, through an Annual Conference of the US Play Coalition (<https://usplaycoalition.org/>).

The Child's Right to Play

"The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation

Table 1 Play and creativity in three vignettes

Play and creativity among siblings: When Charlotte became a mobile infant, scooting and crawling around on the floor, she attempted to join in the high energy movement activities of her big sisters. When they would come through, giggling and squealing in the delight of their game, she would light up, looking up expectantly, watching them move through quickly. When they passed, she would scoot toward the door they just exited, until she heard them coming up from behind – they had gone all around the house and were coming in the other way. She repeated this cycle of follow and rebound many times, always the same procedure, first looking where they left, then turning to watch them come again.

Play and creativity through objects: Declan got a present for their first birthday. Their family prepared a space in the family room, and brought in a white shelf, with a bow on it. The family gave Declan an empty shelf for their first birthday. A few of their favorite toys were soon placed strategically within their grasp. They quickly learned to play with their toys, and then replace them back to the appropriate space on the shelf. While three toys occupied the second shelf, the bottom shelf, at floor level, only had two items. Exploring the empty space in the corner, Declan climbed inside – they put themselves on their shelf, to take themselves out to play.

Play and creativity through the arts: Three-year-old Beiwen was excited about the bugs he found on the playground. When asked about it, he shared a few details. But, when given the opportunity to paint a picture of the bugs on the playground, details emerged. When asked, "I notice you included so many details in your picture. Can you tell me about it?" Beiwen described his picture in a detailed story about the bug.



which should be directed to the same purposes as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavor to promote the enjoyment of this right;" UN (1959). Declaration of the Rights of the Child, Article 7, Paragraph 3. United Nations.

Analysis of early play behaviors common with young children began with Darwin's Baby Diaries of the mid-19th century. A myriad of other studies focusing on play behaviors followed (Frost et al., 2012). Froebel and Pestalozzi, each in their time and place, found children's playful behaviors as productive and useful, not idle or meaningless. Montessori structured whole environments around the playful engagements she observed children initiating through spontaneous activity. Piaget founded whole structures of knowledge about ages and stages of childhood, framing cognitive development theory around the playful antics of his three children: Jacqueline, Lucienne and Laurent.

More recently, some theorists of playful learning focus on adult interactions, such as Walter Drew and companions in the Institute for Self Active Education (<https://isaeplay.org/play-training/>) (Bush et al., 2013). Conversely, Mitch Resnick and the researchers with him in the MIT Media Lab known as Lifelong Kindergarten (<https://www.media.mit.edu/groups/lifelong-kindergarten/overview/>) utilize digital play spaces, such as Scratch to 'imagine, project, share' through coding online computer interactions (<https://scratch.mit.edu/>) (Resnick, 2017).

Defining Play and Creativity

While many academic definitions of play exist, we utilize the framework highlighted by the research of Dr. Roberta Golinkoff and Dr. Kathy Hirsh-Pasek (2008, 2016, 2021) to understand play as organically essential to development and learning. Play is fun. Listen for laughter, and expressions of joy. Players actively engage in moving and manipulating objects, and navigating relationships, all affecting multiple domains of development (Stankovi -Ramirez & Thompson, 2018). The

meaningful purpose of play encompasses play in and of itself, void of a results-oriented, product-driven focus. Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff described play as socially interactive. Mildred Parten (1932) recognized six stages of play, really focusing on the balance between solitary and social engagement through play. Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff noted the purposes for play in education. The profound impact on an individual's brain development is enhanced through interaction with the social impact of cooperative play. This invokes Vygotsky's description of a social womb in the constructive learning environment (Connery et al., 2010; Penfold, 2015; Vygotsky, 1930).

Diverse perspectives of creativity across history leads to difficulty in defining creativity. Many sages and wags have talked of the creative component (Frost et al., 2012; Isbell, & Yoshizawa, 2020; Koralek, 2005; Leggett, 2017; NAEYC, 2014; Tok, 2021; Yates & Twigg, 2017). The Greeks described the MUSE as an influence on human endeavors. Ancient Hebrew texts characterize their god as a creator of humankind made in his image. Humankind was given charge to then create. The mandate was not just to procreate, but to make all things new. The renaissance of Western Europe illustrates creative potential not just in the arts but also in business and economics, industry and agriculture, and exploration of their world and beyond. Creativity spoke to all of these endeavors and adventures.

In the most watched TED Talk of all time, Sir Kenneth Robinson in 2006 spoke about how schools kill creativity. He focused on the factory model of schooling and the disconnect between that model of schooling from actual learning. Sir Kenneth demonstrated a new way to think about the creative process. Turns out this wasn't his first whack at the piñata of creativity. A decade earlier, Sir Kenneth was the chair of the national advisory committee on creativity and cultural education sponsored by the British government publishing the committee report (NACCCE, 1999). While creativity is often considered "out of the box thinking," this report outlined ways to consider creativity as normative for most people.

To contrast with a view of creativity reserved for the fine arts (what they call 'sectoral') or for the gifted or talented (what they call 'elite'), a democratic view recognizes elements of creativity throughout the general population (NACCCE, 1999, p. 28-29) with four components to categorize expression of creativity. The first component of creativity consists of imagination. Every person has access to imagination, as well as a potential for imagination being taught and cultivated. Imagination sparks from many good sources, primarily language and encounters in literature. Another component describes creativity as purposeful. The old saying 'necessity is the mother of invention' comes to mind. Creativity is used by many people in many cultures to solve problems. The third component of creativity is originality. While considering an act original if never before seen, instances of originality occur when first introduced into a group or culture, or even the first time an individual experiences it. The fourth component of creativity involves participation in judging value and appreciating preferences refined through discipline and experience.

While trained and gifted artists wonderfully and blissfully explore

the creative arts, the accessibility of creative arts to all emerges from a democratic view of creativity (NACCCE, 1999). The following sections provide tools for building creativity through play across the creative arts including dramatic play, movement and dance, music, and visual arts. Additionally, play and creativity as a tool for creating the self delve into social and emotional learning, social constructivism, and the spiritual life of children.

Building a Toolbox for Creative Arts in Early Childhood Classrooms

Early childhood is a time of great creativity. Building creativity into the learning environment should be natural, organic, as observant teachers follow the child. Here are steps to build a toolbox for creative arts in early childhood classrooms and how they become tools for creating self (Table 2).

Children engage in symbolic representation as they move from “objects as objects” to “objects of their imagination” (Table 3). Providing open-ended opportunities for imagination helps promote creativity in dramatic play. Exploring the sounds of language, and the humor in jokes and riddles, are creative forms of play. The natural environment contains many items to interest young children. Prompting children to create miniature ‘fairy’ gardens invites prolonged engagement with imaginative dramatic play with naturally found objects.

Movement and Dance as a Tool for Play and Creativity

Opportunities for children to explore the body in space develops proprioception, the awareness of the body in space (Table 4) (Carlson, 2011; Huber, 2015; Keeler, 2020). Children learn through experiences with movement and play. Simple songs exploring body parts begin this process (e.g., “Open, Shut

Them”, “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes”). Movements to dramatize lessons (skits, represent science/life cycles, etc.) increase learning outcomes. Jean Piaget emphasized “concrete operations”- the need for children to learn through physical engagement (Frost et al., 2012). Integrating movement opportunities into the curriculum enhances learning and development across the learning domains. Engaging, joyful movement opportunities build motor skills and motivate children for physical activity across the lifespan.

Table 2 Tools for creating self through the arts

Tools for Creating Self	Learning and Development
Dramatic Play <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language arts: Reading, writing, speaking, listening Poems, songs, nursery rhymes Jokes & riddles Open-ended opportunities for imagination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> e.g., dress up, miniature ‘fairy’ gardens with natural objects 	Nurturing throughout all domains: physical, language, aesthetic, cognitive, emotional, and social <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creativity Self-awareness Motor skills Motivation for physical activity Conflict resolution Social-emotional growth Cognitive growth Collaboration skills Problem solving skills Subject area learning standards Perspectives and understanding the world around them Democracy amid a culturally diverse society
Movement & Dance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple songs to explore body parts, like “Open, Shut Them” or “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes.” Movement to dramatize lessons, like skits, represent science/life cycles 	
Music <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poems, songs, nursery rhymes Rhythm and meter exploring the elemental components of music (rhythm, melody, harmony, form, and timbre) 	
Visual Arts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drawing, painting, sculpting with clay and mud, collage 	

Table 3 Imagination at the Block Center

The block center provided ample opportunities for manipulating and moving objects. After stacking and building enclosures, 15-month-old Kiara engaged with Abu in a repetitive series of motions and interactions that seemed orderly, but their meaning eluded the caregivers observing them. Finally, Kiara picked up a block, held it to her ear, and said “Hawoo.” She was playing like the block was her phone. The shift from playing with “objects as objects” to becoming “objects of imagination” demonstrated a new level of symbolic representation.

Table 4 Exploring the environment through movement

A mobile infant, Dharma is playing on the rug with a toy. He looks up distracted by his teacher’s voice. She is across the rug talking to another child. He looks back at the toy in his grasp when something else catches his attention. The baby puts down the toy and transitions from sitting to crawling position and begins to move closer to this object. He reaches for it. Once in the baby’s grasp, he explores by feeling the object with his hands and moving his arms up and down watching the toy. As should be expected, Dharma explores the object by mouthing it.

Music as a Tool for Play and Creativity

The Suzuki Method of music instruction involves child-centered approaches that fosters whole child learning and development (Table 5) (Suzuki 1969). The underlying principle signifies the potential for anyone to be a musician with the right learning experiences including:

- Providing a nurturing and positive environment through involvement of teachers, parents, and other learners
- Engaging children in rich musical experiences that scaffold learning by:
 - First, listening to music to understand the rhythm and patterns in the pieces;
 - Next, learning about the musical instrument through exploration;
 - Then, focusing on hearing and imitating sounds; and
 - Finally, learning to read music.

Table 5 Learning to play music through exploration

Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998) grew up next to his father's violin factory in Nagoya, Japan. His early experiences with violins and music laid the foundation for his success as a musician. After hearing Schubert's Ave Maria, he brought home a violin from his father's factory. By listening to songs and imitating the violist, he constructed his own understanding of how to play the violin. This occurred through an initial focus on studying sounds instead of reading music notes. He began teaching children with the same method which aligns with evidence-based teaching and developmentally appropriate practices.

Music entails an artistic experience present across the globe. Sharing poems, songs, and nursery rhymes creates a common culture, a canon of childhood that writes cultural values deep within the young child's soul. Utilizing rhythm and meter to explore the contrast of duple meter (e.g. "Mary Had a Little Lamb") to triple meter (e.g. "The More We Get Together!") accentuates how the elemental components of music (rhythm, melody, harmony, form, and timbre) enhance a classroom community as they manage their playlist of favorite songs.

Visual Art as a Tool for Play and Creativity

Exploring the visual arts afford children the opportunity to utilize their creativity (Table 6). Drawing and painting, sculpting with clay and mud, emphasizes a process orientation rather than a product mind-set. John Dewey expressed the value in art as an integral part of teaching and learning: "Art is the most effective mode of communication that exists" (1934, p. 286). Dewey views art as an

instrumental tool for children to communicate their perspectives and understandings of the world around them (Mattern, 1999). On the other hand, providing children opportunities to explore a variety of art from different cultures and from different places increases children's understanding of democracy amid a culturally diverse society.

Table 6 Exploration of visual art: four vignettes

First marks on paper: Abbie holds a crayon in a palmar to grasp the crayon and move it around. As she moves her hand up and down, the crayon marks on the paper sparks amazement from the child.

The art shelf in Pre-Kindergarten: The art center was the focal point of a three-year-old classroom in a Reggio-inspired public school in the Midwest (Krechevsky et al., 2013). Shelves were filled with a variety of art mediums and supports, or surfaces to compose and construct art. Mediums included clay, acrylic paints, markers, charcoal and watercolor pencils, chalk, oil pastels, Collage materials, scraps of different types of paper, natural materials, wire, beads, scissors, glue, and even glitter also filled the shelves. The beginning of the year sometimes felt daunting and laborious as expectations, routines, and procedures were practiced. However, instead of teaching children explicit expectations for many routines and procedures, children learned how to use art mediums through exploration. For example, children figured out the right amount of glue for different materials through trial and error. Providing trays to enable children to explore and guiding children in cleaning up the area when finished turned "errors" into teachable moments. Children not only felt a sense of confidence, but also felt a sense of independence in getting out supplies, choosing a project, and putting unused supplies back.

Kindergarten painting easel: The easel in the kindergarten contained primary colors of acrylic paint, blue, yellow, and red, while black, white and brown paint were available on the side shelf. Children experimented with color by mixing combinations of the paint colors until the desired hue was created. This initiated many in-depth conversations about color theory.

Modeling with clay: After initial explorations in texture and form with clay, PK students begin modeling the classroom pets. Woody, a guinea pig, and Rosie, a Flemish giant rabbit began as shapeless balls of clay and monochromatic circles of paint. Midyear, the abstract depictions of the classroom pets transitioned into representational, or naturalists, designs including detailed, polychromatic paintings and sculptures.

Play and Creativity as a Tool for Creating Self

The organic nature of play in children negates a need to script a child's play. Simply providing creative opportunities and materials enables creating the self through play. The following three sections describe tools for creating self through play and creativity: Social emotional learning, social constructivism, and the spiritual life of children.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social and emotional learning (SEL) begins at birth and continues throughout a person's lifespan (Table 7). Social smiling and laughter begin in infancy including early signs of empathy arising as infants mirror caregiver's tone and expressions. Ashiabi (2007) characterizes the social side of development in how children interact with peers and build

friendships, whereas how children respond to peers and situations as the emotional side of development. Providing opportunities for play nurtures learning physically, socially, affectively, and cognitively in conflict resolution, social-emotional growth, cognitive growth, collaboration skills, problem solving skills, and content subject-area learning standards.

Children's social experiences are full of emotions. As children engage in new experiences and begin to build peer relationships, children learn the strategies to respond to these emotions. Supported by a multitude of pedagogical theories, children gain many social and emotional skills through play. Children can be more successful in this informal, natural and relaxed state. Piaget (1951, 1995) believed children gained perspective-taking abilities through peer play. Erikson (1982) asserted make believe play is a means to understand cultural and societal expectations and norms.

Social play progresses through a four-step process. Initially, children engage in nonsocial activity or solitary play. Then, children transition to parallel play and begin to use the same materials but may not interact. Children then advance to associative play conversing and sharing materials while involved in separate activities. Finally, children engage in cooperative play or group play participating in a shared play scheme.

Social Constructivism

From a deep understanding of the psychology of development, Vygotsky (1930; Connery et al., 2010; Penfold, 2015) added a fundamentally social component to his observations and speculations on the development of children. His view of creativity and imagination resides in a collective creativity with children's actions appearing independent and autonomous, actually being



collaborative and collective within the sphere of immediate context and through larger cultural influences. Language serves as a predominant vehicle for cultural induction (**Table 8**). Cultural icons that include art, music, dance, and theater enable the child to become a native of her mother tongue.

The fundamental codes of a culture - those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices - establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home. (Foucault, 1970, p. xx)

This social constructivism connects multiple strands of development into the creative act. The child, acting on his environment, driven through internal mechanisms of attachment and meaning making, creates for herself a soul, a being made in the image of her culture. Yet, one of a kind, unique in all historic time and creation.

Play is understood as a creative act that reconstructs, appropriates and transforms human experience to produce new realities. Imaginative play is presented as an integral part of experiencing the world from new and multiple perspectives (Penfold, 2015).

Table 7 Understanding feelings and emotions through books

When he was about 18 months old, Jawdat was used to reading together with his family. Books were friends, just like people and pets. One busy play day, a sudden noise startled the toddler. When his father scooped up the toddler and soothed his tears, the child pointed to the library shelf. Daddy thought it was to read a book to comfort and calm. No, not that book, not that one either. Finally, Jawdat found the book he was looking for, a favorite he had read many times - *Where's the Green Sheep* by Mem Fox (2004). Daddy settled down to read it, opening the cover to the first page. No, not that page, Jawdat flipped through until he found the page he wanted. The picture showed a sheep standing atop a high diving board. Daddy read "Where's the scared sheep?" The pre-verbal toddler didn't know the word 'scared' but he knew the feeling! And he knew where to find it in one of his favorite books.

Table 8 Language acquisition through exploration with others

Oliver was born into a busy household, with two big sisters and a mom and dad. The first months included much growth and many milestones. He was making all the usual oohs and coos, babbling along with sounds of his home, his native language, his mother tongue. Around five months, the family was gathered, playing together, lots of laughing. Suddenly they stopped, suspecting something different was going on in their baby's noise making. He stopped. They started talking, laughing, carrying on, and the infant became active again, making noise like them. When they stopped, he stopped. This repartee went on and on for quite a while. This child was working on language based in the context of playing together within those relationships most significant to him.



Spiritual Life of Children

All creative work through play informs the whole child's development, from physical and language, aesthetic and cognitive, emotional and social (ASCD, 2021; Cooper, 2013). An even greater development of creativity and play within the community of family and the school occurs within what some perceive to be the life of the spirit. Aline Wolf, a Montessori author and publisher (1996), wrote on the role of nurturing the spirit in the work of early educators.

Our task as spiritual nurturers becomes easier when we realize that we do not have to instill spirituality in a child, we have only to protect it from being trampled and to nourish its natural growth (p. 29).

She followed Montessori's design in teacher preparation, promoting the act of teaching as a transformative act bringing life to the teacher lessons brought content to the children. This interaction of spirit with the social life of the classroom brings the aesthetic sense to the forefront.

Living a Creative Life in the Company of Young Children

Play and creativity enhance learning and development across the domains supporting the whole child. The benefits of play and creativity move in waves across the lifespan even into adulthood (Thompson & Stankovi-Ramirez, 2021). In a world that is ever changing and often unpredictable, play and creativity enhance skill sets necessary for success inside and outside of the classroom in the present and the future. Through play and creativity, children build perspectives and understanding of the world around them to navigate democratically amid a culturally diverse society. Hence, teachers of young children should both offer and engage in opportunities for play and creativity.

- What drew you into spending a life with young children?
- How has your life changed by keeping company with playful, creative young children?

We are caregivers, and children need care for so many aspects of their busy lives. And yet, the work of creating their selves, the internal construction of who they are, is their work alone. We are privileged to have a toddler who recognizes us, a kindergartener who shares their latest joke, or an elementary child who keeps us up to date on their reading list. Such creative work of childhood isn't reserved for children. Lucky us, we get to experience childlike wonder and love of learning throughout our lives. Even better, we are invited to live our creative life in the company of young children.

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