IES Institute of Education Sciences

Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands

Fact Sheet

What Is Play-based Learning in Kindergarten?

A Resource for Parents and Caregivers

Across the country, education reforms have raised academic standards, essentially making kindergarten into "the new first grade."[1] Critics, including the National Association for the Education of Young Children, argue that these raised standards and the teaching methods necessary to meet them are not developmentally appropriate for the nation's youngest learners.[2]

New Hampshire is leading the nation in efforts to guarantee a joyful and age-appropriate learning experience for kindergarteners. In 2018, New Hampshire passed a law requiring schools to use play-based learning in kindergarten–an approach that aims to foster students' love of learning while imparting important social and academic skills.

But what does "play-based learning" mean? You may wonder how your child will learn important skills through play. New Hampshire has developed a guided-play approach for learning in kindergarten that encourages children to direct and lead their own play with facilitation and guidance from teachers. Through guided play, teachers help children make meaningful discoveries and reach specific learning goals.[3] This resource highlights the components of this approach, which include:

- A thoughtful learning environment designed by teachers and students
- A "pre-play meeting" led by the teacher
- Dedicated time for child-led play, guided by the teacher
- A "post-play reflection" led by the teacher

Research-based examples of students learning both academic and social-emotional skills through play are also illustrated throughout this resource.

CLASSROOM SET UP

Guided play creates authentic and meaningful opportunities for children to learn. It allows children to direct their own learning within a playful context that is set up by the teacher to foster specific learning goals.[4]

PRE-PLAY MEETING

The teacher first gathers all students together in a group to introduce new materials, make connections, and lead students in a planning discussion before play begins.

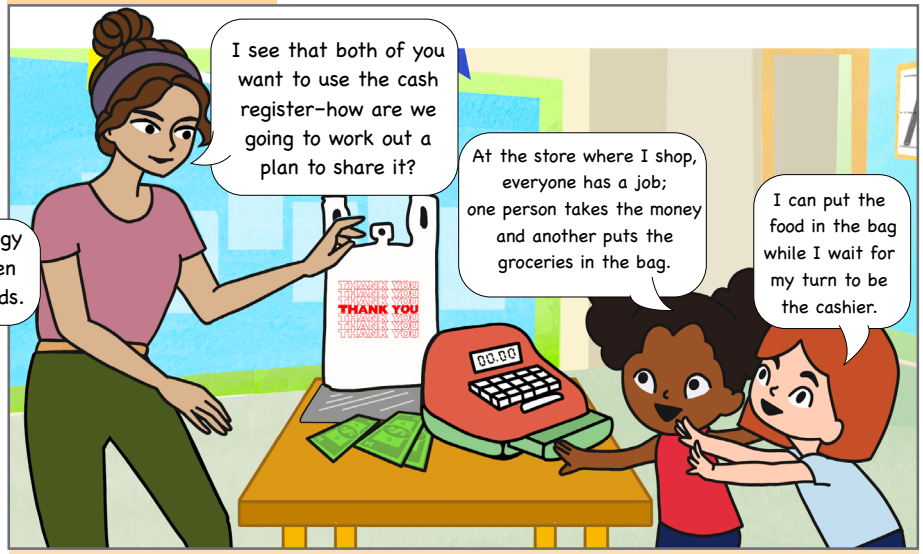
GUIDED PLAY

Play allows children to develop their understanding of complex math concepts in contexts that are concrete and meaningful.[5]

GUIDED PLAY

Play provides authentic contexts that motivate learners to practice new literacy skills like letter-sound recognition.[6]

GUIDED PLAY

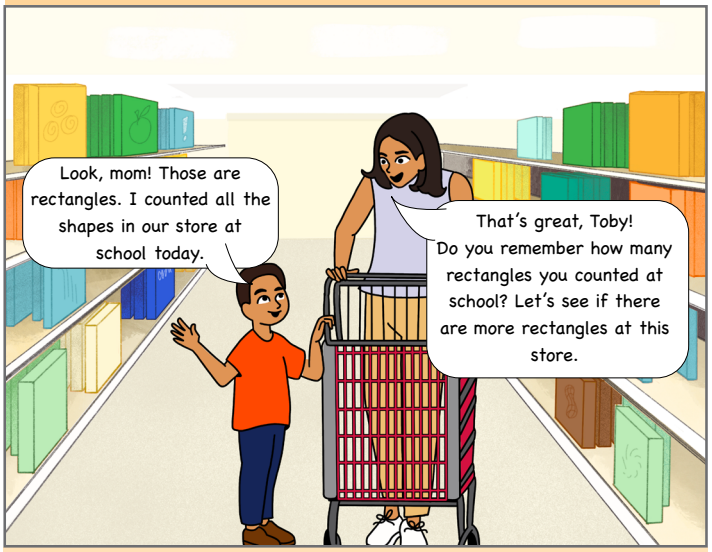


Play helps children build skills like collaboration, cooperation, and critical thinking.[7]

POST-PLAY REFLECTION

Reflection is a crucial step in the learning process.[8] Teachers invite children to share and reflect on their experiences to help them expand their learning.

CONNECTIONS TO EVERYDAY CONTEXTS



Play helps children make connections about what they know across contexts and communicate about their discoveries.[4]

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