

Supporting School Leaders and Teachers to Implement Research-Based Early Learning Practices

Research-based early learning practices such as play-based learning and high-quality teacher-student interactions provide multiple benefits for young children's development and can increase the likelihood of improved academic outcomes into adolescence and even adulthood.¹

How do high-quality teacher-student interactions support student learning and academic success?

When teachers thoughtfully engage with students, model respect, build trust, and support student learning by encouraging positive relationships in the classroom, they are implementing high-quality interactions that lead to student growth and academic success.²

To implement high-quality interactions that positively influence student behavior and academic learning, teachers must:



understand each student's unique needs and learning styles,



recognize that student achievement is predicated on feelings of acceptance and capability, and



be readily available to guide, model, and support learning.³

What is play-based learning?

Teachers can capitalize on students' motivation to explore, experiment, and solve problems by incorporating play into lessons and learning activities.

Play-based learning does not require identified learning objectives, but researchers have identified five characteristics of effective play-based learning: it is **meaningful, actively engaging, joyful, iterative, and socially interactive**.⁴

Play-based learning can be...

- child-driven with activities selected by students, or
- play that involves teacher guidance, planning, or interaction to initiate or sustain the play activities.⁵



Some examples of play-based learning activities include stacking three dimensional shapes based on a task card, recreating and acting out stories during a whole-group activity, engaging in a scavenger hunt around the classroom for hidden numbers and letters, and building and testing a marble or domino track.



What is LEAD?



Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southwest is partnering with the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) and school districts in Oklahoma to build educator capacity to implement research-based early learning practices that improve outcomes for prekindergarten (preK) and kindergarten students. Through this partnership, REL Southwest and OSDE are co-developing the Leading Early Childhood Achievement and Development intervention. LEAD is a professional learning experience for elementary school leaders designed to increase teachers' use of research-based early learning practices such as play-based learning and high-quality teacher-student interactions in the classroom.

How does LEAD support school leaders and teachers?

LEAD provides important foundational information and support to build the capacity of school leaders to understand and support teachers' use of research-based early learning practices. Effective instructional leaders build and foster a school environment in which teachers routinely collaborate and reflect on ways to improve their teaching practices.⁶



School leaders participating in LEAD will...

- attend a 2-day kickoff training
- complete four asynchronous training modules
- engage in a virtual professional learning community with other school leaders
- receive guidance and resources to conduct classroom walk-throughs
- lead communities of practice (CoPs) with preK and kindergarten teachers to support teachers' implementation of research-based early learning practices



PreK and kindergarten teachers participating in LEAD will...

- complete the same four asynchronous training modules as school leaders with learning activities designed to support individual reflection and classroom implementation
- apply concepts learned in the modules within their classrooms
- participate in CoP convenings facilitated by school leaders

CoPs will provide opportunities for teachers and school leaders to discuss strategies for implementing play-based learning activities and high-quality teacher-student interactions that support academic achievement. The LEAD partnership will refine its professional development approach over the next four years in collaboration with OSDE.

To learn more about REL Southwest and LEAD, visit our website: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/region/southwest>.

¹ Berk, L. E., & Meyers, A. B. (2013). The role of make-believe play in the development of executive function: Status of research and future directions. *American Journal of Play*, 6(1), 98–110. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1016170>; Burchinal, M., Vandergrift, N., Pianta, R., & Mashburn, A. (2010). Threshold analysis of association between child care quality and child outcomes for low-income children in pre-kindergarten programs. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 25(2), 166–176. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ874842>; Marcon, R. A. (2002). Moving up the grades: Relationship between preschool model and later school success. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 4(1), 18–20. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED464762>.

² Cornwell, M. (2022). *Promoting quality interactions in early childhood settings*. Teachstone. <https://info.teachstone.com/blog/quality-interactions-early-childhood>.

³ Brown, C. P. & Mowry, B. (2015). Close early learning gaps with rigorous DAP. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 96(7). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1058912>.

⁴ Zosh, J. M., Hopkins, E. J., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Neale, D., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Solis, S. L., & Whitebread, D. (2017). *Learning through play: A review of the evidence*. The LEGO Foundation. https://cms.learningthroughplay.com/media/wmtlmbe0/learning-through-play_web.pdf

⁵ Danniels, E., & Pyle, A. (2018). Defining play-based learning. *Encyclopedia on early childhood development*. OISE University of Toronto, Canada. <https://www.child-encyclopedia.com/play-based-learning/according-experts/defining-play-based-learning>.

⁶ Miller, R. J., Goddard, Y. L., Goddard, R., Larsen, R., Jacob, R. (2010). *Instructional Leadership: A pathway to teacher collaboration and student achievement*. Education Leadership Research Center. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED528591>; Egert, F., Dederer, V., & Fukink, R.G. (2020). The impact of in-service professional development on the quality of teacher-child interactions in early education and care: A meta-analysis. *Educational Research Review* 29. <https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/EgertDedererFukink2020.pdf>



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