

# Play in the Early Years: Key to School Success

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A generation ago, kindergarten was supposed to get kids ready for school. But now everyone is talking about the importance of “school readiness” **before kids get to kindergarten.**

That’s why many parents, anxious for their children to succeed in school, want highly care and education programs to have children sit at tables using work sheets, drills, and flash cards to learn letters and numbers and even starting to read, add, and subtract.

**But preschoolers learn differently from school-age children:** play is essential to early learning. **Play is the main way children learn and develop ideas about the world.** It helps them build the skills necessary for critical thinking and leadership. **It’s how they learn to solve problems and to feel confident about their ability to learn.**

**Children learn the most from play when they have skilled teachers who are well trained in understanding how play contributes to learning.**

Most child development experts agree that play is an important part of high-quality early learning program. **Play is not a break from learning—it’s the way children learn.**

High-quality preschool and child care programs have lasting benefits....In all the programs, “child-initiated” activities were important—**high-quality teachers follow children’s interests and activities to guide learning.** Kids got to choose from many activities, rather than spending all their time following teachers’ instructions.

Several studies have shown that children learn more from play activities that support their own interests and ideas. **Some researchers have found that too much teacher-directed activity undermines young children’s confidence and motivation.**

Play promotes school success. Research is finding more and more connections between children’s play and school development that helps them succeed in school. For example, pretend play helps children **to think abstractly and to look at things from someone else’s perspective.** Pretend play is also connected to early literacy, mathematical thinking and problem-solving.

When children play, they have a natural motivation to learn...**Children are more likely to remember skills and concepts they learned by doing things that are meaningful to them.**

When children play, they can contribute to school success. Through pretend play, children learn to use their imaginations to represent objects, people, and ideas. **For example: A young child flaps her arms, pretending to be a butterfly.** Another picks up a banana, holds it to his ear like a telephone, and says, “hello.” A preschooler builds a firehouse with blocks.

How does play promote school success? If children can use one thing to represent something else, it’s easier for them to understand that letters represent sounds and numbers represent quantities. **Children who can use their imaginations to visualize historical events or scientific concepts will be able to use their imaginations to visualize historical events or scientific concepts.**

The teacher is key to play-based learning! Children learn more through play when they have **well-trained teachers who know how to respond to, guide, and extend their play to increase learning—and how to assess their development by observing their play.**

When children play they test their developing ideas with objects, people and situations—the key ability for academic learning.