



# Developmental Play

Supporting early learners through joyful, meaningful experiences that build strong foundations for school success

♡ OUR SHARED GOAL

# What is Developmental Play?

Developmental play includes child-led and guided experiences that support growth across all learning domains. It's not just "free time" — it's how young children learn best.

Play encompasses physical, social, emotional, cognitive, language, and creative development, building skills that form the foundation for kindergarten readiness and lifelong learning.

| "Play is serious learning work for children."

## Connecticut Law PA 23-159

Connecticut requires play-based learning during each preschool and kindergarten day through free play, guided play, and games — predominantly free of mobile devices.

# Types of Developmental Play



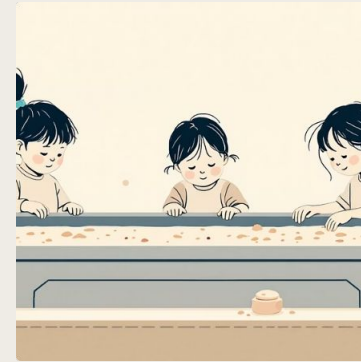
## Dramatic & Pretend Play

Kitchen play, puppets, role-playing scenarios that build imagination and social skills



## Constructive Play

Building with blocks, LEGO, and other materials that develop spatial reasoning



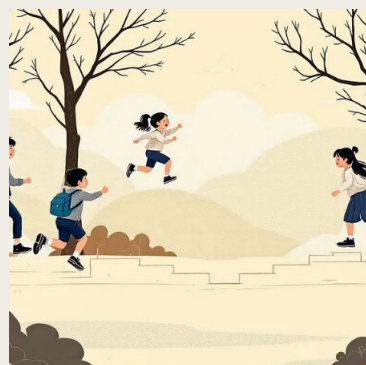
## Sensory Play

Sand, water, playdough, and sensory bins that engage multiple senses



## Fine Motor Play

Puzzles, beads, drawing, and cutting that strengthen hand coordination



## Gross Motor Play

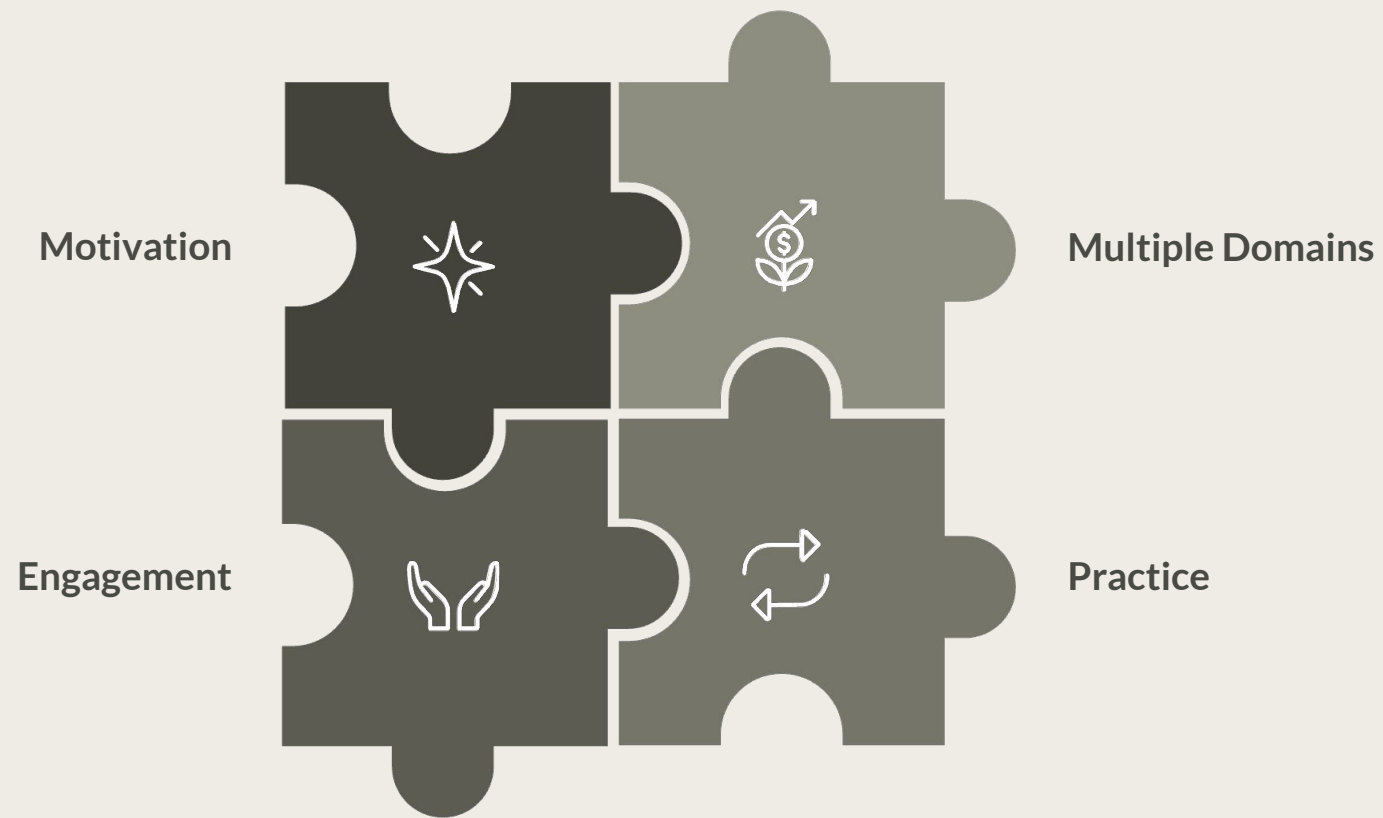
Climbing, running, and obstacle courses that build strength and coordination



## Cooperative Play

Board games and other turn taking activities build skills in following rules of the game, teamwork, handling frustration and cooperative play with peers.

# Why Play Matters



Play creates the ideal conditions for learning by activating children's natural curiosity and drive to explore.

## The Foundation of Early Learning

Play builds intrinsic motivation that fuels a love of learning. It promotes deep engagement and sustained attention to tasks.

Children practice skills repeatedly in meaningful contexts, allowing them to master concepts through joyful repetition rather than drill.

Perhaps most powerfully, play supports development across multiple domains simultaneously — a child building with blocks is developing math skills, language, problem-solving, executive functioning skills and social abilities all at once.

# What Play Develops in Children



## Social-Emotional Growth

- Cooperation and turn-taking
- Emotional regulation
- Confidence and independence



## Cognitive Development

- Problem-solving abilities
- Creativity and flexible thinking
- Memory and attention span



## Language Skills

- Vocabulary growth
- Storytelling and narrative
- Conversational turn-taking



## Physical Abilities

- Coordination and balance
- Overall body strength
- Fine motor control



## Executive Functions

- Persistence to task and Time management
- Planning and Prioritizing
- Organization

These interconnected areas of development support the skills that underlie reading, writing, math, and behavior regulation in kindergarten and beyond.



# Play-Based Learning in Kindergarten



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## Daily Play Time ~30 min/day

Children choose developmentally appropriate high interest structured play stations.



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## Standards-Aligned Play

Play activities are intentionally designed to meet Connecticut early learning standards while remaining developmentally appropriate

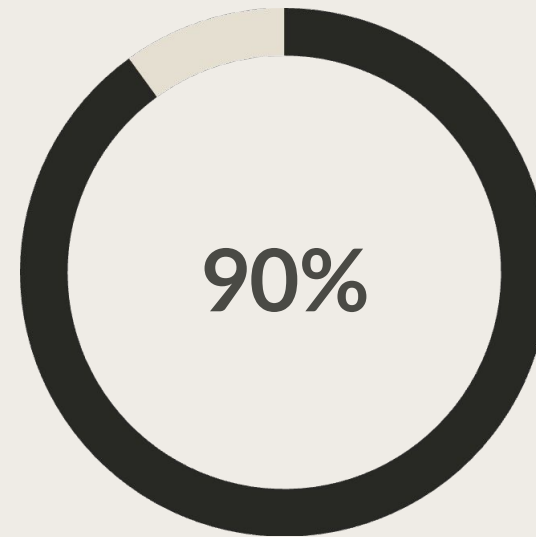


Important: When children are playing in kindergarten, teachers are actively teaching through intentional design and responsive facilitation.

# Brain Development & Play

## Critical Early Years

Ninety percent of brain growth occurs before age five, with neural connections forming rapidly through hands-on experiences. This makes early childhood an especially critical window for development.



Brain growth before age 5

Play strengthens brain architecture by building neural pathways through repetition, supporting sensory integration through exploration, and activating multiple brain systems simultaneously.

### Language Networks

Conversation during play builds vocabulary and strengthens narrative thinking

### Executive Functioning

Planning play scenarios develops self-regulation and flexible thinking

### Serve-and-Return

Back-and-forth exchanges strengthen relationships and learning circuitry

# Myth vs. Fact: Play & Kindergarten Readiness

**✗ Myth: Play is just free time, not real learning**

**✓ Fact:** Play is how young children learn best and supports development across all domains simultaneously

**✗ Myth: Readiness means knowing letters and numbers only**

**✓ Fact:** True readiness includes self-regulation, communication, problem-solving, and social skills — all developed through play

**✗ Myth: Academic worksheets prepare children better than play**

**✓ Fact:** Hands-on play builds deeper understanding and engagement that supports later academic success more effectively

**✗ Myth: If children are playing, teachers are not teaching**

**✓ Fact:** Teachers intentionally design play experiences with learning goals and actively support skill development throughout



# Supporting Play at Home

Families play a vital role in fostering developmental play. Here are simple, practical strategies that make a big difference:

## Provide open-ended materials

Blocks, cardboard boxes, art supplies, and everyday objects spark creativity and extended play

## Allow unstructured play time daily

Limit overscheduling and give children time to explore their own interests and ideas

## Play together without directing everything

Follow your child's lead, ask open-ended questions, and resist the urge to control the play

## Use everyday routines as play

Cooking, sorting laundry, and storytelling offer rich learning opportunities embedded in daily life

Powerful prompts: "I wonder what would happen if..." • "Tell me about what you made." • "How could we solve that problem?"



KEY

TAKEAWAY

# Play Is Learning

Joy and learning are  
**partners, not opposites.**

Developmental play is not separate from learning — it *is* learning.

When play is valued, it supports children to enter kindergarten ready to explore, connect, and succeed.

Through purposeful play, we honor children's natural ways of learning while building the executive functioning, social skills, and academic foundations they need for long-term success.

## Remember

Choice invites ownership and deepens engagement. Play allows children to try on roles, practice skills, and develop confidence as learners.

Connecticut's play-based learning requirement recognizes what research has shown for decades: play is the most effective path to kindergarten readiness and beyond.

Additional resource: [Let's Just Play.pdf](#)