Chapter 2:

A Foundation in Play

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> "Play is a universal activity of children, but it takes different forms, and assumes different kinds of importance, in the diverse contexts of childhood"
> (Brooker and Woodhead, *The Right to Play* 6).

CMEC Statement on Play-Based Learning

In 2012, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) released a joint statement on play-based learning as a means of achieving quality outcomes for early learners:

> Educators should intentionally plan and create challenging, dynamic, play-based learning opportunities. Intentional teaching is the opposite of teaching by rote or continuing with traditions simply because things have always been done that way. Intentional teaching involves educators being deliberate and purposeful in creating play-based learning environments—because when children are playing, children are learning. (*CMEC Statement on Play-Based Learning*)

As you review the statement on the following page, you may be surprised to read that children have the right to play. In fact, Canada ratified the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), an international treaty that sets out universally accepted rights for children. Article 31 of the *Convention* recognizes "the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts."

When you consider children's entitlement to play from this rights-based perspective, you acknowledge play as an essential experience that extends, enhances, and enriches a child's learning. You recognize that when you encourage play, you demonstrate your respect for a child's natural learning strategy. This chapter serves as the foundation that supports the play-based approach to teaching Manitoba's Kindergarten children, underscoring its connection to children's *holistic development* and to our roles as teachers who embrace a playful pedagogy in our day-to-day work with young learners.

CMEC Statement on Play-Based Learning*

At the recent World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, organizers, keynote speakers, scientists, experts, and political figures underscored the enormous benefits of early learning.[1] CMEC agrees with this position and believes that purposeful play-based early learning sets the stage for future learning, health, and well-being.

Learning through play is supported by science.

The benefits of play are recognized by the scientific community. There is now evidence that neural pathways in children's brains are influenced and advanced in their development through exploration, thinking skills, problem solving, and language expression that occur during play.

Research also demonstrates that play-based learning leads to greater social, emotional, and academic success. Based on such evidence, ministers of education endorse a sustainable pedagogy for the future that does not separate play from learning but brings them together to promote creativity in future generations. In fact, play is considered to be so essential to healthy development that the United Nations has recognized it as a specific right for all children.[2]

Learning through play is supported by experts.

Learning through play is supported by early years experts. Lev Vygotsky identified play as the leading source of development in terms of emotional, social, physical, language, or cognitive development. Psychologist David Elkind [states] that "play is not only our creative drive; it's a fundamental mode of learning."[3] Such experts recognize that play and academic work are not distinct categories for young children: creating, doing, and learning are inextricably linked. When children are engaged in purposeful play, they are discovering, creating, improvising, and expanding their learning. Viewing children as active participants in their own development and learning allows educators to move beyond preconceived expectations about what children should be learning, and focus on what they are learning.

[1] CMEC – Canadian Delegation Report from the World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, Moscow, Russian Federation, September 27–29, 2010.

[2] "Fact Sheet: A Summary of the Rights Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child," Article 31. Retrieved on February 11, 2010 from http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf

[3] Wood, E. (2004). "Developing a pedagogy of play." In J. Cullen (Ed.) Early childhood education: Society and culture. London, UK: Sage.

Learning through play is supported by children and parents.

Learning through play is supported by children. It is their natural response to the environment around them. When children are manipulating objects, acting out roles, or experimenting with different materials, they are engaged in learning through play. Play allows them to actively construct, challenge, and expand their own understandings through making connections to prior experiences, thereby opening the door to new learning. Intentional play-based learning enables children to investigate, ask questions, solve problems, and engage in critical thinking. Play is responsive to each child's unique learning style and capitalizes on his or her innate curiosity and creativity. Play-based learning supports growth in the language and culture of children and their families.

When children are playing, children are learning.

Given the evidence, CMEC believes in the intrinsic value and importance of play and its relationship to learning. Educators should intentionally plan and create challenging, dynamic, play-based learning opportunities. Intentional teaching is the opposite of teaching by rote or continuing with traditions simply because things have always been done that way. Intentional teaching involves educators being deliberate and purposeful in creating play-based learning environments — because when children are playing, children are learning.

FROM THE EXPERTS

Play lies at the core of innovation and creativity. It provides opportunities for learning in a context in which children are at their most receptive. Play and academic work are not distinct categories for young children, and learning and doing are also inextricably linked for them.
(Ontario Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program, 2010)

In play, children represent and transform the world around them, providing other children and adults with a window into their thoughts and perceptions, and often helping adults to see the world in new ways.
(BC Early Learning Framework, 2008)

Play expands intelligence, stimulates the imagination, encourages creative problem solving, and helps develop confidence, self-esteem, and a positive attitude toward learning.
(Dr. Fraser Mustard)

* Source: Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. *CMEC Statement on Play-Based Learning*. 19 July 2012. <www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/282/play-based-learning_statement_EN.pdf>. Reproduced with permission.

Kinds of Play

This chapter discusses the various types of play, including exploratory, constructive, symbolic, and socio-dramatic play and games with rules. Children's exploratory, constructive, and symbolic play experiences are of particular importance to learning (British Columbia Ministry of Education, *The Primary Program* 33–34).

Just as there are different kinds of play, there is much variation across developmental levels of children. Children integrate all areas of their learning across all areas of the curriculum, and all developmental domains are nurtured and stimulated. This is why early childhood teachers have always recognized the value of play for children's holistic development. Many researchers (Zigler, Singer, and Bishop-Josef; Singer, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek) concur, and attest to the central role of play as a *medium* for promoting developmental health in a whole, active child at school entry and throughout the Early Years in school.

Since children enter Kindergarten with various kinds of prior play experiences, expect to see some children who are highly skilled play partners, while others will require opportunities to expand their play repertoire further. In addition, some Kindergarten children born into refugee families may have had early childhood play experiences very different from those we may take for granted here in Canada. Play may have a restorative impact on development and relationships among children who have been affected by conflict and war (Hyder).

Cross-Cultural Understandings of Play

Children's play may be influenced by the dynamics of the family's culture. How different cultures look at and interpret play is based on cultural values and points of view, including the very definition of play. Teachers are encouraged to further develop their cross-cultural understandings of play (Hyun).

Source of photograph: Displacement in South Sudan: A Camp within a Camp. A displaced boy plays with a damaged bicycle crankset and crank arm found in the compound. © UNHCR/K. McKinsey, January 2014. <https://m.flickr.com/#/photos/unhcr/11854487296/>. Reproduced with permission.

Which types of play do you see in your Kindergarten classroom? As you observe children playing, you will probably see at least some differences in their play as the year progresses. You will need to adjust your approach accordingly. Teachers who embrace a playful pedagogical approach to learning and teaching foster children's development across all domains.

Exploratory Play

"There is evidence that when children are given opportunities to develop the multiple sensory pathways in their brains by solving problems during play (as compared to completing a single and isolated task), they are laying the foundation for healthy brain development"(McCain and Mustard 6).

When children engage in exploratory play, they experiment with, and explore the attributes of, new ideas or new materials, combining them in new ways to solve problems. This type of play provides children with many social, emotional, and cognitive learning opportunities. As children play, they learn to interact with, control, and master their world.

Play allows children many opportunities to participate in problem-solving activities. As they play with open-ended materials (loose parts), such as sand, blocks, water, and clay, they investigate and discover, explore cause and effect, and learn to create their own theories through hands-on experiences. These play activities are directly related to the development of logical and mathematical thinking. Significantly, through play children also learn there can be more than one way to solve a problem, a skill increasingly important in our world today.

Constructive Play

Constructive play is thoughtful, goal-oriented play. Children engage in constructive play when they use open-ended materials to represent their ideas. When children in the classroom play with blocks, sand, and water, create models, paint, draw, or create three-dimensional sculptures out of clay or playdough, you see examples of constructive play. You support children's constructive play through meaningful interactions, by posing and answering questions, by helping children document what they are learning, and by creating safe and accessible play spaces that are rich with open-ended materials.

Many Kindergarten children enjoy ordering and organizing interesting classroom collections or their own personal collections, such as bottle caps, rocks, hockey cards, buttons, and more. As they construct patterns and assign materials to categories, such as smooth/bumpy or big/small, they make important discoveries about seriation, classification, and so on. You support children's language development as you and the children discuss mathematical concepts, such as height and weight, and use words that define spatial awareness, such as beside or behind. You promote literacy, numeracy, and problem solving as you support and encourage children's constructive play.

Symbolic Play

Symbolic play refers to children's growing ability to use actions, objects, or ideas to represent other actions, objects, or ideas. For example, a collection of buttons or corks can be the babies the children look after; a pot full of alphabet blocks can be the soup they are cooking; a stick can become a magic wand; and a shawl or doll blanket wrapped around one's shoulders can confer superhero powers. A five-year-old who plays the "baby" crawls on the floor, cries for her mommy, and says "goo-goo." Children who have had many such play experiences can even imagine an object without the need for its physical, concrete presence. They can imagine and pantomime talking on the telephone while holding a hand to the ear, rocking a baby in their empty arms, or knocking on a non-existent door asking to be let in.

Symbolic play (where one thing "stands for" or symbolizes another) demonstrates a child's emerging ability for representational thinking. As educators, we understand that symbolic play shares important characteristics with emerging literacy because they both depend on the young child's growing ability to use body language, verbal communication, and mental images to represent. Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3), described an important relationship between symbolic play (first-order symbolism) and reading and writing (second-order symbolism). Both play and learning to read and write are based on young children being able to use many represented meanings and develop similar representational mental processes. Children who successfully use symbols in their play are more ready to accept the idea that the squiggles we name *letters* and *words* stand for items in their real world. You can provide opportunities for children to engage in symbolic play, and coach children who are less experienced in this type of play, understanding you are offering those children important scaffolds to their emerging literacy and numeracy abilities. In fact, "fantasy play is the glue that binds together all other pursuits, including the early teaching of reading and writing skills" (Paly 8).

Socio-Dramatic Play

Some Kindergarten-age children like to pretend to play a story or scenario with defined roles ("You are the baby and I am the Mommy") and a plot ("We will go to the doctor's office to get you your needle"). These mature players will invent props to fit the roles they have defined, use language to mediate the roles and the plot through complex narratives, and become completely immersed in their make-believe world if we allow large chunks of time required for the full unfolding of the story. Socio-dramatic play helps children grow socially, as they think about other people's points of view, not just their own—a concept often referred to as *theory of mind*.

When children share their fantasies and their good ideas, they can think beyond their own family and the way things are done at their own home. They can think about the bigger world and all the people in the community. What is the job of the grocer at the neighbourhood market? What is the job of the Kindergarten teacher? What is the job of the firefighter who saves people's lives, but who also checks the baby's car seat to make sure it is installed correctly? Pretending takes lots of practice by the preschooler and is one type of play that shows great variation, depending on prior experiences.

Socio-dramatic play that entails verbal communication and interaction in small and large groups where children have to put themselves in another's place fosters empathy and consideration for the feelings of others. Role-playing helps a child to define social roles, practise turn taking, and be accepted by others—all important aspects of successful group interaction needed later in life. Socio-dramatic play where children are pretending or acting out a story with friends, family members, or their teachers helps children to understand themselves, their feelings, and the feelings of the people around them, allowing children to develop appropriate social behaviour (Burke 19–20).

We see rich socio-dramatic play emerging among experienced players who take on assigned roles, such as a teacher or mother, and stay in character during this play. These players may also take on less concrete roles, such as magical characters, superheroes, or aliens. Kindergarten children may use language play in symbolic ways as they tell jokes, pose riddles, and enjoy rhyming. They engage in literacy and numeracy play as they create shopping lists or take orders in the dramatic play centre; they may pretend to read the books that are familiar to them, or use play money to pay for their purchases at the store you have set up.

Games with Rules

Children enjoy simple games with rules.

During the Kindergarten year, most children become increasingly comfortable playing games with rules. They may enjoy playing board games (e.g., Candyland, Lotto), simple card games (e.g., Go Fish), group activities (e.g., Simon Says, Red Light, Green Light), or hopscotch in the gymnasium or outside. Children may follow established rules, they may create their own rules during their free play (e.g., when they agree that a particular tree becomes "home free"), or they may demonstrate a shared understanding (e.g., that the child who plays the patient does not grab the stethoscope from the child who is the doctor). Games with rules help children learn to follow directions, to monitor their own impulses, and to develop *self-regulation*. In fact, "Kindergartners learn self-regulation best through activities in which children—and not adults—set, negotiate, and follow the rules" (Bodrova and Leong 2). You will read more about self-regulation later in this chapter.

Games with rules also help children to develop self-esteem and independence. They foster children's interaction, cooperation, and communication skills. In addition, they can support literacy and numeracy objectives, nurture children's physical capabilities, and encourage discovery and exploration in the classroom.

Development across the Domains through Play

Consider the humorous cartoon "A Play Creation" depicting children learning through play across all their developmental domains (see Figure 2.1). Are you able to articulate, with the same clarity as these young students, how the children in your Kindergarten learn? Do you value play as their teacher does? How do you respond to people who may not value play in quite the same way, as is the case with the visitors at the door?

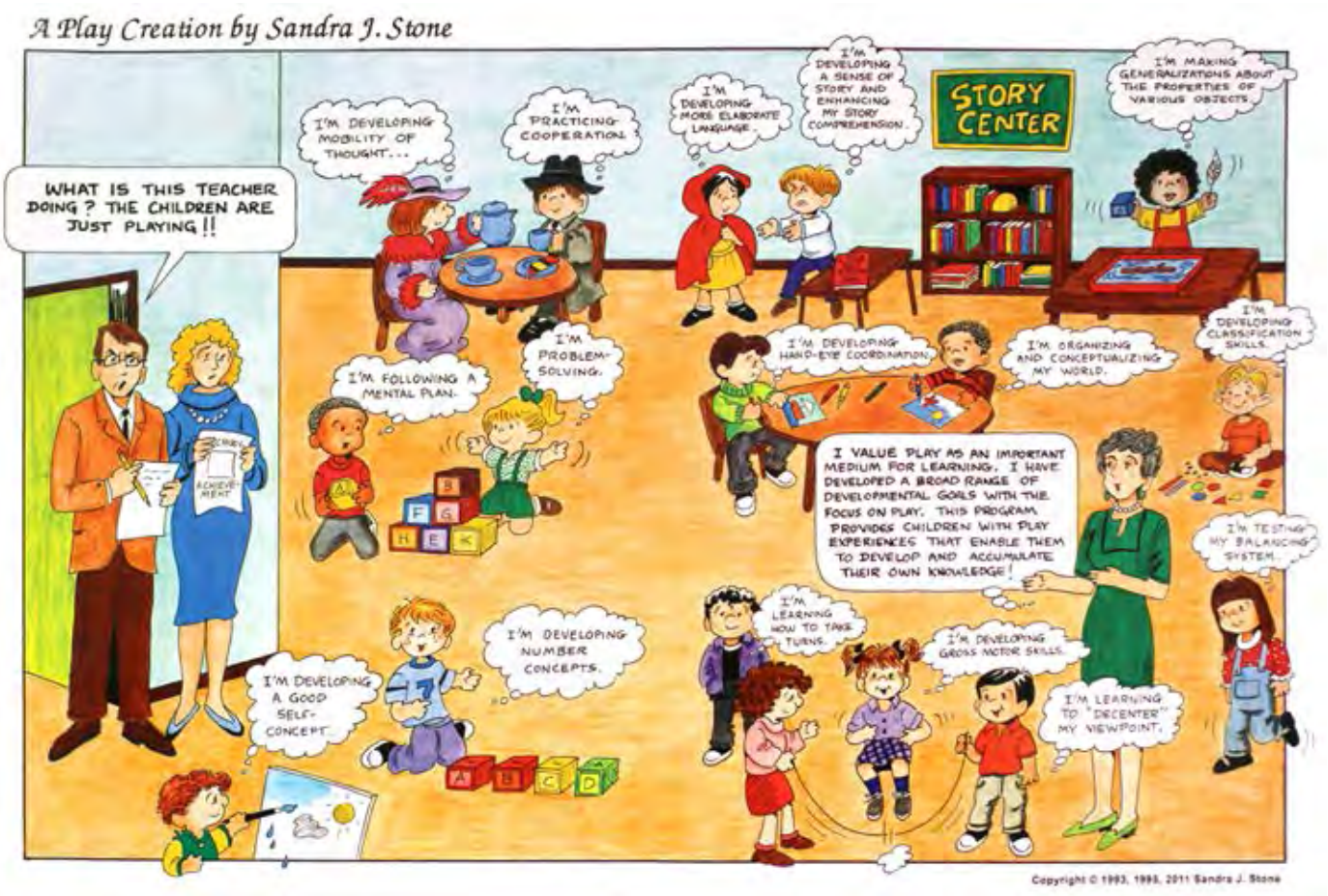

Figure 2.1: A Play Creation*

* Source: Copyright © 1993, 1995, 2011 Sandra J. Stone. Reproduced with permission.

What are some of the ways you see children's development being fostered through play each day in your own Kindergarten classroom? Using the language of child development can help you to specify and describe the important learning you see in the children you teach.

The domains of children's development are closely related and intertwined, and play is influenced by and has an impact on all areas of development. Remember, too, that development has a large range. Some children may demonstrate strengths in one or two domains at an early age, while others may not yet have mastered some of these indicators, and still may be considered developmentally "typical."

The five developmental domains demonstrated through play (see Figure 2.2) are:

- physical health and well-being
- emotional maturity
- social competence
- language and thinking skills
- communication skills and general knowledge

A discussion of these developmental domains follows.

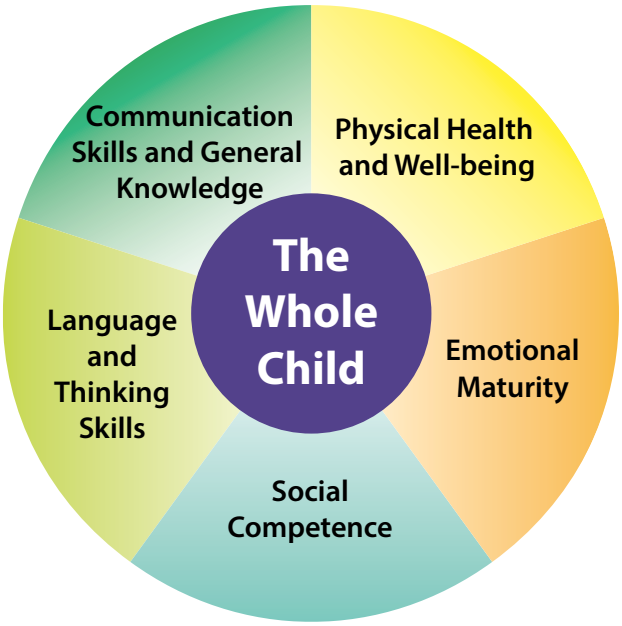

Figure 2.2: The Five Developmental Domains

Physical Health and Well-being

Five-year-old children are moving out of the preschool time of their lives and, as a result, the rate of their physical growth may slow down a little. At the same time, many children are becoming stronger, faster, and more competent at physical challenges, such as catching a ball or holding a pencil.

Five-year-olds may demonstrate many *gross motor skills* such as these:

- running, jumping, climbing, kicking, and throwing
- bouncing and catching a medium-sized ball
- skipping
- hopping on one foot
- walking backwards for two metres, walking in a straight line, and walking up and down stairs
- standing on one foot for five or 10 seconds
- learning more complex body coordination skills, such as swimming, skating, and riding bicycles or other riding toys with pedals

Children's *fine motor skills* include the following:

- drawing and printing, holding the crayon or pencil between thumb and index finger
- cutting with scissors
- tracing basic shapes or drawing a line with control
- doing up buttons and zippers
- using a fork properly
- putting together a 10- to 12-piece puzzle

When children play, they experience increased feelings of well-being, leading to better mental health outcomes: "The pleasure and satisfaction associated with play and the freedom from pressure to perform in play supports the development of a strong sense of wellbeing" (Gordon, O'Toole, and Whitman, as cited in Kennedy and Barblett 6).

Physically active play helps children to develop gross and fine motor skills and experience other health benefits, such as improved metabolism and energy expenditure. Recently, however, many researchers and educators have become increasingly alarmed about the poor physical health of Canadian children. The organization Active Healthy Kids Canada analyzes current data and literature related to physical activity and creates a report card. In 2013, Canadian children were given a D–, as 93 percent of 5- to 11-year-olds did not meet Canada's physical activity guidelines of 60 minutes of physical activity a day (*2013 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth* 6).

Fortunately, according to David Elkind,

> A child in a developmentally appropriate early childhood program will get all the exercise and all the preparation for sports that she needs in the school's outdoor or indoor play area. Pumping on a swing, going up and down a slide, riding a trike, playing in the sandbox, or scrambling up a climbing structure afford age-appropriate practice for young muscles. In addition, a play area allows children to choose which activity they want to participate in and when they want to stop. They are also able to take age-appropriate risks and engage or not engage socially with other children. . . . Play is the dominant mode of learning. (82)

Essentially, movement experiences in Kindergarten should expose children to a wide variety of appropriate physical activities so they acquire efficiency in basic movement or gross motor skills. Prior to beginning school, children develop and start to refine gross motor skills as they gain mastery of their bodies and environments. They acquire gross motor skills in a sequence of phases that started with the reflex level of functioning. These skills develop to the point where specialized movement skills allow school-age children to learn and participate in a variety of sports and games. Through the acquisition of gross motor skills and fitness, children are able to participate successfully in a variety of progressive and appropriate physical activities (as discussed in Chapter 8).

Emotional Maturity

Shanker advises us to "focus on the emotional qualities that create mentally healthy children: their motivation, curiosity, empathy, emotional range, self-esteem, internal discipline, creativity, and moral integrity" (4). How do you see these qualities in your Kindergarten classroom?

By the time they enter Kindergarten, most emotionally healthy children

- are excited to start school
- are usually comfortable being left at school by their parents or caregivers
- rarely or never use aggression to solve a conflict, do not have temper tantrums, and are not mean to others
- are able to concentrate, settle to chosen activities, and wait their turn
- control impulses and think before doing something (most of the time)
- can take personal responsibility for many self-help tasks, such as dressing in outerwear, putting away toys or belongings, and taking care of their own toilet needs
- help someone who is hurt, sick, or upset
- offer to help spontaneously
- invite bystanders to join in

A child who has mastered the steps to tying shoelaces spontaneously helps a child in need.

While independence is a trait that many Kindergarten teachers value, some parents may value interdependence far more dearly and may interpret the push for independence as demanding that their child grow up too quickly. In other cases, parents or early childhood educators may have worked with children entering Kindergarten to ensure that they can zip or button up their own sweater or jacket, tie a knot, and fasten buttons they can see. Many Kindergarten children can tell their left hand from their right, separate confidently from their families at the start of school, and even cross a street safely. Other children may be quite overwhelmed by the busy Kindergarten classroom and the increased expectations for behaviour and school work and show fearfulness, anxiety, or aggressive behaviours that signal their internal distress.

Self-regulation is the child's ability to direct his or her own feelings, thoughts, activity levels, actions, and attention. It is different from self-control and relates more to the child's ability to handle various stressors, such as noise, light, frightening experiences, or frustration. Self-regulation is a key indicator of children's success in school, but this trait takes much practice to develop.

When you introduce games such as Simon Says or Frozen Tag, you support the development of children's executive function—the place where self-regulation resides. Low-stress games such as these require children to concentrate and to pay attention—they must remember rules (Do I follow Simon, or the leader?)—and they require children to mediate their own behaviours. These important personal qualities also predict academic success.

As children play, they learn to shift attention, remember, and inhibit their impulses; as a result, they are able to plan, solve problems, and work toward a goal. These skills relate to later achievement in social competence and in academic content, including numeracy and literacy (Bodrova and Leong 1). Furthermore,

> when play emerges from children's interests it will engage their focus. It will help them to consider the perspectives of others and figure out what they are thinking. Play encourages communication about wants and fosters connections between objects, people . . . [and] ideas. It is a challenge that children can take on which requires self-direction in order to maintain. (Shanker 4)

Play supports the development of persistence, emotional competence, and empathy as young children become more aware of their own emotions, motivations, and desires, as well as those of their friends, teachers, and families. Open-ended play enables children to "work through and make sense of their scary, confusing, and frustrating experiences" (Miller and Almon 50). As children play, they discover areas of personal competence that bolster their feeling of self-worth and being accepted. They experience the personal strength and sense of worth that come from growth in knowledge and the ability to reason and solve problems. As children play, they develop confidence in making personal choices and taking appropriate risks. They learn that everyone makes mistakes and that this is an inevitable and acceptable part of learning and growing. Through play, children also develop increasing self-control and a realistic acceptance of personal limitations and the shortcomings of others, and they become increasingly resourceful about trying things in different ways.

Social Competence

Social competence describes various aspects of a child's social development. Most five-year-old children

- demonstrate the ability to get along with and play with other children, share, take turns, and play fairly, and are usually cooperative and self-confident
- have learned to verbalize their feelings, needs, and wants (especially those with prior preschool experiences)
- may compromise to solve interpersonal or other problems they experience, even if frustrated or angry
- ask for help when required
- may use polite phrases, such as "please," "thank you," and "excuse me"
- develop special friendships with some peers in the classroom
- show respect for the rights, property, and feelings of others

- accept responsibility for their own actions
- show self-control
- typically go along with classroom rules, limits, and routines, especially when they have a chance to help develop them and when these are handled consistently and in a child-centred manner
- learn to adjust easily to changes, such as the presence of a substitute teacher, or learn to manage themselves during a special assembly in the gymnasium with other older students (with practice)
- demonstrate their enthusiastic approach to new activities
- are curious about and eager to explore their surrounding world

Social Competence Dependent on Linguistic and Cultural Understandings

Social competence is highly dependent on cultural and linguistic understandings. Many English as an additional language (EAL) children have limited experience interacting with English-speaking children. This may mean that they are unfamiliar with the expected social-cultural norms and language required for social interactions. Teachers support EAL Kindergarten learners by explicitly modelling and then guiding EAL students to verbalize their feelings, needs, and wants, as well as by coaching them with the language required to engage in interpersonal communication (discourse patterns, and so on).

As children play, they increase their ability to solve social problems, to formulate and modify courses of action, to cooperate by respecting agreed-upon ways of doing some things, and to lead and follow. As they make play choices, children develop some of the skills needed in group and personal decision making, and learn to accept realistically the consequences of specific decisions.

Children with effective social and emotional skills do better in getting along with others, understanding directions, and focusing on a task; these key skills enhance school success and lifelong learning. Brain research confirms that the ability to regulate emotions in early childhood is ultimately associated with the development of problem-solving skills (Posner and Rothbart).

Within the context of playing simple games with rules and in social play, children experience successful interactions with their peers and gain the practice they require in their social-emotional development. These pathways to social-emotional development lead to key outcomes such as the following:

- more empathy
- better control of impulsive actions
- better ability to take on the perspectives of others
- better prediction of others' preferences and desires
- better emotional and social adjustment
- more innovation

- more imaginativeness
- longer attention span
- greater attention ability
- more peer play

Language and Thinking Skills

During the Kindergarten year, most children

- enjoy an increasing ability to "use their minds" and are laying a foundation for the more formal learning of later developmental stages
- can be very talkative, ask many questions, and create their own theories about those questions
- appreciate new words and use longer sentences to articulate their thoughts
- understand and follow directions even when several steps are involved
- remember routines and experiences even when they took place in the past
- show interest in books and in learning to read, and listen carefully when books are read aloud
- know how to handle a book, can identify some letters and attach sounds to some letters, show awareness of rhyming words, and know the direction flow of writing (from left to right)
- are able to write their own name and are interested in writing on their own initiative and not only under their teacher's direction
- may count to 20 and recognize common shapes and many numbers
- can compare numbers, sort and classify, use one-to-one correspondence, and understand simple time concepts

Numeracy, literacy, and oral language itself develop through social interaction and through play at the sand and water table and at other traditional Kindergarten learning centres (about which you will read more in Chapters 5 and 6).

Research by various child development experts has concluded that through play, children show

- better verbalization
- richer vocabulary
- higher language comprehension
- higher language level
- better problem-solving strategies
- more curiosity
- higher intellectual competence

As children play, they are developing memory for telling their own stories and remembering stories they have heard. They use more complex language and vocabulary, demonstrate imaginative and flexible thinking, and make many scientific, mathematical, and social discoveries. Play offers "the freedom to explore, discover and be inventive [and] prepares children for intellectual enquiry" (Brooker and Woodhead, *The Right to Play* 28).

As you plan for purposeful play experiences, you can include activities that help children to

- develop expressive and receptive language skills
- become more sensitive to sensory stimuli and become responsive to the environment, but not overwhelmed by it
- become increasingly capable of making sensory discriminations
- develop self-direction and independence
- symbolize ideas
- develop more mature thinking skills, to include thoughtful questioning and independent problem solving
- classify and order the phenomena of the world
- understand the spatial relationships of weight, height, size, and shape
- establish handedness
- develop the habit of left-to-right eye movements
- store sensory impressions in the form of images
- improve in auditory and visual discrimination
- grow in the ability to listen, to follow directions, to recall main ideas, and to react to stories

Communication Skills and General Knowledge

Children with strength in the domain of communication skills and general knowledge are able to

- communicate easily and effectively with adults and their peers
- verbally communicate their own needs and their ideas and plans
- share their personal experiences in ways that others can understand
- participate in storytelling or imaginative play, and recall and retell a story through play or in direct response to a more formal question
- listen when someone talks to them, and understand and respond to requests
- articulate clearly and proficiently in their first language
- be curious about and interested in their surrounding world

- answer questions or offer information spontaneously, demonstrating their general knowledge about the world (e.g., leaves fall in the autumn; oranges, bananas, and apples are types of fruit; there is a desert in Manitoba)

Implicit Versus Explicit Learning*

Do [EAL] learners acquire principles of language without being conscious of them, or can they also learn from explicit instruction? Explicit language teaching was common in the past, but in recent years due to the widespread influence of Krashen and others who argued that explicit knowledge could never become automatic, many teachers believe that children can learn EAL implicitly through general classroom experiences and with little focused instruction. However, an increasing body of evidence suggests that there is a role for both types of learning and that some explicit instruction facilitates the process. . . .

Many teachers . . . assume that students will simply "pick up" English without any language instruction as they interact in cooperative learning experiences in a language rich environment.

* Source: Manitoba Education. *Manitoba Kindergarten to Grade 12 Curriculum Framework for English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Literacy, Academics, and Language (LAL) Programming*. Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Education, 2011. Section 2, 2.3 to 2.4, 2.12.

Many Kindergarten learning experiences help expand children's communication skills and their general knowledge. Children build strength in this domain when they are read to, engage in pretend play, participate in field trips, learn from special visitors to the classroom, are a part of library time or a general assembly, cook together, talk about feelings, and share many rich conversations about their interests, activities in the school, and current events. Try to make connections between experiences, ideas, and books (e.g., "That dog on the sidewalk looks just like the dog in *Harry the Dirty Dog*, the book by Gene Zion we read earlier today.").

Of course, play offers the chance for sustained and shared thinking between adults and children. As children play with you, the learning materials in your classroom, and their peers, they are practising their communication skills and expanding their general knowledge about the outside world. Children share information with one another through play, and you can introduce ideas into the play that helps to support and extend it.

In Kindergarten, "play provides a natural integration of learning domains, integrating social, emotional, and physical learning with cognitive and academic learning. This integration is difficult to achieve and maintain in teacher-directed instruction" (Hewes 5). Developmentally appropriate learning experiences can be found in the subject area curricula. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 of this document detail how to approach the Kindergarten curriculum through play.

Developmental Health at School Entry

As you learn more about the individual children in your classroom, you recognize their strengths, interests, and talents, as well as their emerging capabilities and/or areas of vulnerability. You use a *holistic* approach to children's development and teaching, by simultaneously addressing the five broad developmental domains identified in Figure 2.2. The five developmental domains are the same ones you

consider during the biannual Early Development Instrument (EDI) assessment you conduct on the children in your classroom. You should, of course, consider them year round. For more information, see Appendix A: Early Development Instrument.

Children are born ready to learn. The EDI is a community-based tool to support families and communities to prepare children for success in school. Schools and early childhood development (ECD) partners collaborate to meet the developmental needs of children from birth to six years of age. School readiness can be conceptualized as a child's developmental health at school entry. An important question is whether the child has the ability (often formed through prior experiences) to meet the task demands at school and the potential to benefit from the educational experiences provided by the school (Offord Centre for Child Studies).

Considering Cultural and Linguistic Contexts

When interpreting the results of developmental assessments such as the EDI, it is important to consider the child's cultural and linguistic contexts:

> Development and learning are universal processes but they take place in specific contexts . . . . Variations in children's development and learning are shared by cultural values, strongly linked to economic and structural inequities, as these impact on the capacities of parents to promote their children's development. (Brooker and Woodhead, *Culture and Learning* 1)

When hearing the phrase *ready to learn at school*, people often think about a child's ability to learn to read, write, and do arithmetic. While these things are important, a child's *readiness to learn*, as you know, also includes non-academic outcomes, including

- emotional health and maturity
- ability to get along with others and learn new skills
- language development and thinking skills
- ability to communicate with others and to understand the surrounding world
- physical health and well-being

Remember that

> the most relevant child attributes for success in kindergarten are social awareness and social skills such as friendship-making, self-regulation, knowing how to resolve conflicts with other children constructively, the ability to communicate needs, wants and thoughts verbally, and an enthusiastic approach to new activities. (Doherty 2)

Reflection: Are Our Schools Ready for the Children?

As champions for young children within our schools, we can shift the question "Are children ready for school?" to "Are our schools ready for the children?" From a philosophical perspective, some teachers talk about focusing on children "being" rather than "becoming" by thinking about children and who they are today, which can relieve some of the pressures teachers feel to make sure children become ready for Grades 1, 2, and so on. What do you think?

Using a Play-Based Approach

Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning recommends 45 minutes to one hour of child-initiated play per day during the Kindergarten year.

Given the importance of play in children's development, what is the role of the teacher in a play-based classroom? How do teachers actualize a play-based *pedagogy*? Current research confirms that young children need a balance of child-initiated play in the presence of engaged teachers and more focused experiential learning guided by teachers. Along with many play experts, Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning recommends 45 minutes to one hour of child-initiated play per day during the Kindergarten year.

Consider the Kindergarten continuum represented in Figure 2.3. Where, along the continuum, do you think your current approach would fall? Generally, teachers who provide developmentally appropriate experiences find they move back and forth along the central part of this continuum, depending on the needs of the children and the focus of the learning at the time. The practices recommended within this document are found along this central part of the continuum: a classroom rich in child-initiated play and a playful classroom with focused learning. Note that *regardless of whether children are initiating their own learning or teachers are guiding it, children are playing and adults are fully engaged*.

"Learning is child-directed and not adult controlled. Guided play is not direct instruction dressed in playful clothes" (Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff 7).

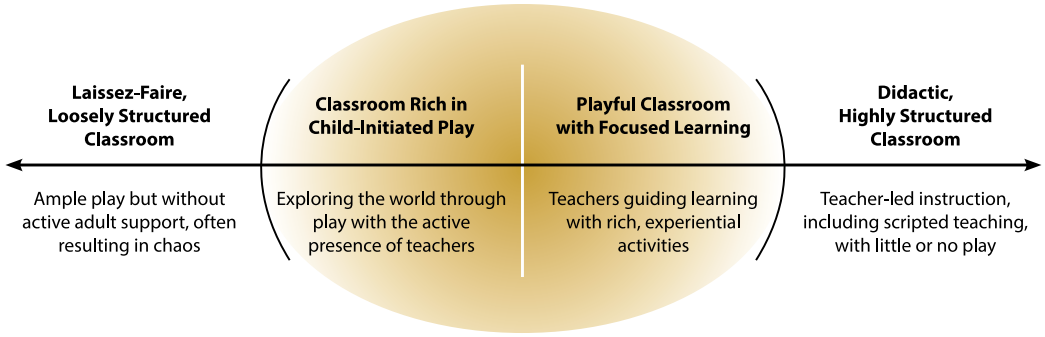

Figure 2.3: The Kindergarten Continuum*

* Source: Miller, Edward, and Joan Almon. *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School.* College Park, MD: Alliance for Childhood, 2009. 12. Available online at <http://drupal6.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/kindergarten_report.pdf>. Reproduced with permission.

Consider these two types of playful learning (child-initiated play and a playful classroom with focused learning) as the way through which you differentiate your instructional approach. Sometimes, the playful learning will be child-initiated, and children will choose their own level of challenge from the range of learning experiences available to them throughout the Kindergarten classroom. At other times, you will initiate the learning experience, and children will be stretched in a low-stress opportunity. In either case, you know that children's development is optimized through play. Through your playful pedagogy, you can address the development of children's "language skills, early literacy, conceptual learning, problem solving, perspective taking, creativity, and representational skills" (British Columbia Ministry of Education, *Full Day Kindergarten Program Guide* 14).

Figure 2.4 presents another image of the various kinds of activities engaged in by children and teachers in classrooms. In truly play-based Kindergartens, children participate in a balance of child-initiated and adult-guided activities within an environment where play is encouraged and nurtured. Seek the balance or the middle ground between these approaches to support children's learning in an intentional way.

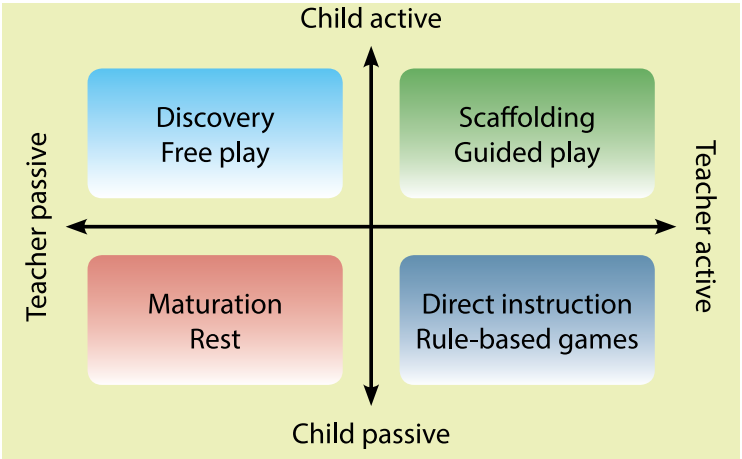

Figure 2.4: Teacher Activity and Child Activity*

* Source: Snow, Kyle. 2011. "Research News You Can Use: Debunking the Play vs. Learning Dichotomy." *National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).* Washington, DC: Author: <www.naeyc.org/content/research-news-you-can-use-play-vs-learning>. Copyright © 2011. NAEYC®. Reprinted with permission.

Guided play is quite different from free play because teachers intentionally plan around curricular goals and offer learning experiences that respond to children's desire to explore and play with interesting and novel materials that are learning-orientated. Adults scaffold on children's interests and accomplishments by enriching their learning environments in developmentally appropriate ways; for example, the presence of books and writing materials in many areas of the Kindergarten classroom gives children access to print in ways that are meaningful to them in the moment.

Developmentally appropriate practice for the EAL children in your class includes determining the individual student's stage of English language development and intentionally incorporating the EAL curricular goals in an inquiry and play-based learning environment.

Individualized Support

Individualized support for EAL children might include frequent teacher (or peer) modelling of specific discourse patterns when playing, with opportunities for rehearsal: "It's my turn." "I want a _____."

When you comment on children's play and discoveries, and when you ask open-ended questions (e.g., How else could you make that bridge balance?), you encourage children to think more deeply, help them to see connections, and show that you value their learning. Remember that children are the active drivers of their learning.

A teacher acts as an encouraging audience, helping children to connect their puppet play to a familiar story.

What is the teacher doing while children play? What exactly does active support look like? During children's play, you can provide active support by

- playing
- listening
- documenting
- supporting
- asking thoughtful and open-ended questions
- coaching
- prompting
- guiding
- observing
- assessing
- asking direct questions
- providing direct instruction (as appropriate)
- connecting
- extending
- facilitating
- provoking
- commenting
- narrating

Teachers provide these varied supports to children as they engage in child-initiated play and experiential learning. They seek to achieve a genuine balance between child-initiated and adult-guided play. Help children to plan their play, monitor the progress of their play, and coach those who are less mature in their play.

The process of providing active support while children play may require teachers to reflect critically on how things currently work in their classrooms, to promote practices that are developmentally appropriate, and to eliminate those that are not. Teaching techniques include asking open-ended questions, modelling, demonstrating or suggesting ways to use the learning materials that the child may not have thought about, scaffolding, and direct instruction, as appropriate. While there is certainly an important place for adult-guided learning in Kindergarten, try to avoid didactic lessons from the "sage on the stage." Instead, adjust your approach based upon your observations of children and your knowledge about their learning styles, while responding to the teachable moments that present themselves. For example, at a time when a child seems ready to print his or her name, a brief mini-lesson on letter direction may be just what that particular child needs, but not the entire group.

As you get to know the children in your classroom each year, you may adapt your role to support their playful learning. You intentionally create social environments that support children's play by acting as a socially competent play partner, modelling play conversations for children ("Hey kids, can I help?"), and providing many open-ended play materials in sufficient quantities to stimulate children's conversations and ease their sharing. You are actively present during choice times, and offer problem solving as needed. You assist children as they initiate play, individualizing your support to meet children's diverse needs (Kennedy 21). You approach the beginner as a *model*, the child who is developing play skills as a *coach*, the more experienced player as an *advisor*, and the most experienced children as a *mentor*.

The following table suggests some of the supportive actions Kindergarten teachers undertake as they play with children. In addition to providing whole-group instruction, teachers model, coach, advise, and mentor young children during their Kindergarten year. Watch for the actions taken by teachers in the vignettes you will read throughout the rest of this document.

Supporting Play*

Stage	Role	Actions
Beginning — with direct support	The Model	showing, instructing, explaining, directing, making explicit, demonstrating, giving examples
Developing — with guided support	The Coach	structuring, sequencing, focussing, cueing, guiding, organizing, supporting
Applying — with minimal support	The Advisor	suggesting, reminding, promoting, monitoring, asking for elaboration
Extending	The Mentor	extending, stretching, wondering aloud, exploring, "what if-ing"

* Source: Kindergarten Learning Project. *Full Day Kindergarten Program Guide.* Copyright Province of British Columbia. All rights reserved. Adapted with permission of the Province of British Columbia.

Reflection: How You Support Children's Play

Think about your own teaching approach and how you support children's play-based learning, considering your interactions with individual children in your Kindergarten classroom:

- In what ways do you fill the various roles of model, coach, advisor, and mentor in your work with the children?
- What are some specific actions you take in these roles?

Summary

As discussed in this chapter, your role as a teacher during children's play is to

- help children become more engaged in playful learning
- develop more sophisticated play and problem-solving strategies
- create a rich learning environment where play flourishes
- expose children to new experiences, both in the classroom and through field trips
- be a playful role model
- support children's progression into games with rules

In subsequent chapters, you will examine how play can infuse your approach to the Kindergarten curriculum and how your classroom and teaching strategies can create "places where children wonder, discover, imagine, construct and learn by trial and error so that from their experiences they can develop their own framework of knowledge and a firm sense of self" (Bos and Chapman xv).

Chapter 3 addresses the view of the child and focuses on developmentally appropriate practices.

Continue Your Learning

For more resources about play, see:

Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, Early Childhood Learning and Development Working Group. *CMEC Early Learning and Development Framework*. 17 June 2014. <www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/327/2014-07-Early-Learning-Framework-EN.pdf> (3 Nov. 2014).

Elkind, David. *The Power of Play: Learning What Comes Naturally*. Berkeley, CA: Da Capo Press, 2007.

Epstein, Ann S. *The Intentional Teacher: Choosing the Best Strategies for Young Children's Learning*. Rev. ed. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2014.

Hyder, Tina. *War, Conflict and Play*. Debating Play Series. Ed. Tina Bruce. Berkshire, England: Open University Press, 2005.

Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care. *Early Returns: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Preschool Centres and Nursery Schools*. Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care, June 2011. Available online at <www.gov.mb.ca/fs/childcare/early_returns.html> (19 Sept. 2014).

Phillips, Eva C., and Amy Scrinzi. *Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice: An Introduction for Teachers of Kindergarten*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2013.

Roopnarine, Jaipaul L., James E. Johnson, and Frank H. Hooper, eds. *Children's Play in Diverse Cultures*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994.

For more information on how to support EAL learners, refer to the Early Years EAL Acquisition Continuum in Section 4a of the following resource:

Manitoba Education. *Manitoba Kindergarten to Grade 12 Curriculum Framework for English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Literacy, Academics, and Language (LAL) Programming, June 2011 Draft*. Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Education, 2011. Available online at <www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/eal/framework/index.html> (7 July 2014).