Fundamentals of Play: A Teacher’s Role in Play

A Cheat Sheet

Even the most well-intentioned teachers can disrupt play. One reason this happens is we interpret play from an adult lens.

Examples:
1. We see a child building a LEGO aircraft with three wings and no cockpit. We teach the “correct” way to build a plane. Later we learn the child was building a zoo for flying gorillas that sleep underwater.
2. A teacher jumps into the bakery scene and directs it like a bakery. However, in this bakery, fully baked goods fall from the sky. They are made by space aliens.

Disrupting play often leads to unintended consequences such as preventing students from:
- thinking for themselves
- problem-solving independently
- leading their own play
- practicing creativity

Child-Centered Ways to Engage in Play

- **Parallel Play** means engaging in similar or totally different activities alongside children as they play. In parallel play, one plays side-by-side without influencing others.
- **Modeling** means thinking aloud and/or demonstrating specific actions or behavior. Modeling is like an open invitation to imitate or join; it is not a direction or command.
- **Posing questions** means asking children open-ended questions about their play. In order to maintain the integrity of play, the question posed must be an authentic one - not one intended to check for understanding or assess - you must really want to know the answer.
- **Posing problems** means introducing new challenges to a play situation.
- **Changing, adding or removing materials** means changing, adding or removing materials from a play space in order to respond to children’s needs and/or maintain novelty.
- **Observing** means collecting information about students: play patterns, language, peer interactions, etc. Observation allows students to take ownership of their own play, providing opportunities for you to identify patterns, strengths, needs, etc.
Before we engage in child-centered play, we must first identify a learning goal.

**Common learning goals include:**

- **Support social skills**
  - Ex: Student rarely plays collaboratively with others
- **Create schema**
  - Ex: Student has not yet learned or experienced the gardening process
- **Improve gross and/or fine motor skills**
  - Ex: Student wants to color in the lines
- **Develop imagination**
  - Ex: Student has a hard time using available materials in play
- **Support language acquisition**
  - Ex: Student needs to build vocabulary for a specific context

Once we have established a learning goal, we can choose a play strategy to support it.

**Post-PD Challenge**

1. Observe one student and identify a specific learning goal.
2. Determine how you will engage in play to help this student reach this goal.
3. Engage in play.
4. Share your observations and reflections with a coach, PLC, mentor, or colleague.