

# ROUTINES & LEARNING CENTERS IN THE PRESCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

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Parent: "What did you do in preschool today?"

Child: "I played."

"Play!": That's your typical response from a preschooler! And,

yes, children *do* learn best through play. Play is essential for healthy growth and development in all areas of learning. In the preschool classroom, we strive to take great care in setting up the environment to nurture play. We create learning centers and plan experiences that are meaningful, engaging and hands-on for our students. These

experiences correlate to the *Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards*

(*IELDS*): these are expectations for young children's development in all areas of learning). For more information, please visit [www.illinoisearlylearning.org/ields](http://www.illinoisearlylearning.org/ields) or refer to the *IELDS* document that was distributed at the beginning of the school year.

In planning for learning, we take into consideration the growth and development of the whole child, that is, nurturing each child's language, physical well-being, social-emotional well-being and cognitive growth.

Play is what helps children discover the world and make sense of it. Exploration, investigation and social-interaction take place in active play. Discoveries and inventions are made, risks

are taken, rules are followed, other's perspectives taken, negotiations are made, conflicts emerge and get resolved, imaginations soar and children's sense of wonder is awakened.

All this in play! And although on the surface it may seem disorderly and chaotic to an observer, young children's play is very much purposeful because it's child-directed and, therefore, intrinsically motivating. There are many stages of play and it becomes increasingly complex through experience and growth. With time, children begin to engage in play that is more elaborate, detailed, and cooperative.

We allow children to choose centers, or learning areas, in

the classroom EVERYDAY. The classroom environment includes space for small, individual, and large group activities. The learning centers are carefully and intentionally prepared and offer multiple opportunities for children to explore, make discoveries, experiment, pursue interests, and meet their developmental needs. Below, we offer you a peek into a typical day in the life of a preschooler and we list and explain the valuable learning that takes place during each routine and within each classroom center. This information is also found in the booklet, *A Parent's Guide to Preschool* that was distributed at the beginning of the school year.



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## ARRIVAL

Children begin each day by entering the building and locating their name tags, so that they know where to hang up their backpacks and jackets. The children are learning to recognize their names and important self-help skills (dressing and undressing):

Once in class, children assemble into a circle and determine who is present and who is absent that day. We may sing a greeting song, read a story, do rhyming activities, introduce the alphabet letters, finger-plays and discuss what will happen on this particular day. There is a visual schedule that highlights the sequence of the day. We meet in a circle, once again, at the

end of our school day to reflect about our experiences and touch on classroom issues/conflicts and rules (if necessary). Much learning takes place in the everyday routines and children feel secure and comfortable when they know what to expect.

## **LEARNING CENTERS**

After circle time, children choose from many of our centers (learning areas) to explore in. These include: the math table, science center, housekeeping area, art table, writing center, blocks, dramatic play, trains/cars, sensory table, play-doh, and more. We regularly change and rotate many of our centers, based on the theme of each month, the season, and children's interests. Play at these centers contributes to children's cognitive, physical, social-emotional and creative development. Play really is children's work! We believe strongly in the concept that young children learn through active exploration of their environment in child-initiated and teacher-selected activities. Learning centers are equipped with materials that are inviting, meaningful, and appropriately challenging to children. Materials are carefully chosen to encourage open-ended and creative play that promotes higher-order thinking and emphasizes language. While at learning centers, teachers may work with students one-on-one and in small groups on projects and mini-lessons covering a variety of skills addressing domains of development.

More about our specific learning centers:

### **MATH CENTER**

At the math center, children have the opportunity to handle manipulatives (such as dominoes, counters, small attribute blocks, number puzzles, balance scales, geometric shapes, etc.) that help them build important foundational mathematics skills, such as: sorting by various properties, identifying and extending patterns, identifying shapes, counting, matching, measuring, sequencing, comparing and more.

### **SCIENCE CENTER**

At the discovery zone, or science center, children play the role of investigators. They are learning about how things work and are using their senses to explore the world around them. We rotate the objects at the science center based on seasons and themes and provide a variety of science activities/experiences for children to engage in. These science experiences include opportunities for children to engage in observing, questioning, experimenting, predicting, comparing/contrasting, classifying, hypothesizing, collecting and analyzing data, and drawing conclusions. Some of the materials found in our science center include: natural materials, rocks, leaves, magnets, seeds and

plants, mirrors, gears, balancing scale, tongs, tweezers, eye droppers, viewers, magnifying lenses, paper and writing tools, informational books related to displays, etc.

## **PLAY-DOH and MANIPULATIVES**

We have plenty of manipulatives (or table toys), which are small toys for children to manipulate. These include: snap blocks, magnet tiles, lacing cards, gears, pegs, puzzles, and more. Manipulating these provides children with the opportunity to strengthen their fine-motor skills, improve hand-eye coordination, and strengthen mathematical skills, such as sorting, counting, and patterning.

Play-doh strengthens small muscles: children can squeeze, pinch, roll, cut, and poke small objects into play doh.

## **HOUSEKEEPING CENTER**

At the housekeeping center (or kitchen), children act-out scenarios, often what they may experience at home with family. Children express their emotions in role-play. There are child-sized tables and chairs, baby dolls and cribs, play dishes and food, a stove, washer and dryer unit, sink, dress-up clothing, and telephones. Play at this center promotes creativity and communication, social skills (sharing, taking turns, negotiating, conflict resolution, etc) and enhances language development. These scenarios increase in complexity over the year as these skills are strengthened.

The dramatic play center allows children to assume different roles. As they act out these roles, children's vocabularies expand and they learn more about the important jobs and community workers in the neighborhood. We provide props and costumes to help children bring these to life. Different settings and occupations are portrayed throughout the year at the dramatic play center. These include: grocery store, doctor's office, veterinarian's office, dental office, restaurant, train station, and more. Props that enhance literacy are incorporated into the dramatic play center (clipboards with grocery lists, sign-in sheets, menus, tickets, receipts, etc.)

## **ART IN EARLY CHILDHOOD**

Experiences in art, whether in visual art, drama, music, or dance, provide a healthy avenue for children to express themselves and their comprehension of the world. Children have opportunities to explore a wide variety of media and use different techniques, including: paint, finger-paint, clay, play dough, crayons, markers, cutting and pasting, collages, and

much more. In preschool art, we focus on the process, not the end-product.

### BLOCKS/TRAINS/CARS

At these centers, children use their large-motor skills and improve their coordination and control. In building with blocks and train tracks children may encounter some challenges and learn about how things work (“How do I get these blocks to stand, not fall?”). Children learn to become more persistent and improve their problem-solving abilities.

### SENSORY TABLE

One of the most exciting centers in preschool! Children love to use the sense of touch to learn about things. The sensory table is filled with different textures, which we rotate throughout the school year. Children examine the properties of these textures using their hands. We begin the year with sand and change to water, noodles, fake snow, rice, beans, dirt, pom-poms, and more. Tools include spoons, funnels, sifters, spinning mills, cups, etc. Using these, children practice measuring and explore cause and effect.

### THE GREAT OUTDOORS

After centers, children line up, get dressed, and go outdoors (weather-permitting, of course)! Outdoor play helps children strengthen their large-motor skills, such as coordination, control, and balance. We use the preschool playground, where children have the opportunity to run, climb, slide, play catch with balls, jump around and use their imaginations! Sometimes, we go for neighborhood walks and explore nature, signs, houses, and decorations. Children need to play outside!

### SNACK and DISMISSAL

Children are offered a snack and milk daily by choice. Children relax a little bit, sit together and have the opportunity to socialize with their peers! It’s a time we also celebrate classroom birthdays. Then, we say farewell and go home! **Note: This school year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, snacks are instead sent home with students daily.**

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The document below highlights the developmental stages of play in young children. It is normal and typical for preschoolers (ages 3-5) to participate in all variations of play listed. It is more common for younger preschoolers (three year olds) to participate more frequently in solitary, onlooker, and parallel play, though all preschoolers may play alone at times. Though we encourage cooperative play at school, solitary, onlooker, and parallel play is equally respected and valued and should not be discouraged, as this play has vital benefits. Solitary play instills independence and confidence, develops creativity, improves focus, and promotes initiative. Participating in solitary and independent play is considered normal (as long as children do not exclusively play alone at all times). Even older children enjoy and crave solitary play at times. Children need more quiet and down time, especially in the fast-paced society of these days. Playing alone does not mean others do not want to play with children. Children should be offered the opportunity to freely choose what type of play they’d like to participate in. In the hustle and bustle of a preschool classroom, sometimes students seek alone time. In fact, our preschool program is required by the state of Illinois to set up learning stations and centers that promote solitary and independent play.

Typically, our preschool program holds parent educational sessions addressing a variety of topics relating to early childhood education and development, with a special focus on learning through play and young children’s behavior. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are unable to offer the parent education sessions this school year. (We may be able to offer a few virtual options - so stay tuned!) Below is information about a video on play that is always shown to our participants at the play education session. It is titled, *Prescription for Play*. The video is about 12 minutes in duration and It features pediatrician Dr. Ken Ginsburg. The topic is especially relevant in today’s fast-paced and competitive world and a reminder about slowing down and truly valuing **early childhood as the very unique stage of development that it is**. We highly encourage you to view it:

On *YouTube*, simply type in a search for:  
*Prescription for Play, Ken Ginsburg*

# SOCIAL STAGES OF PLAY

## Unoccupied Play



The random movements that Infants make with no clear purpose is the beginning of play.

## Solitary Play



When children start to play on their own. Children do not seem to notice other children sitting or playing nearby during this type of play

## Onlooker Play



When children watch others play. The child who is looking may ask questions but there is no effort to join the play.

## Parallel Play



When children begins to play side-by-side with other children without any interaction. They are paying attention to each other.

## Associative Play



When children start asking questions of each other. They have similar goals but there are no set rules.

## Social Play



When children begin to share ideas and toys, and follow established rules and guidelines.

[www.encourageplay.com](http://www.encourageplay.com)

As always, please feel free to contact me with any questions or if you'd simply like more information/resources about the value of play in the lives of young children.