



# WHAT IS FREE PLAY?

Free play is when children are able to select what they want to play, the materials they will use, and their companions based on their own interests, and they have freedom to manage their own play independently, as they are able.



Free play is the best opportunity during the day for individualized teaching to occur as teachers rotate throughout the room having conversations with children about their play.



As children engage in free play, they use all developmental domains. Group times typically only allow children to use a few domains.



To maximize learning, plan as much free play in the schedule as possible, with some indoors and outdoors. Minimize or eliminate whole group times by using optional small group stations during free play.



Add structure to facilitate successful play.

- Use interest centers, instead of open play spaces.
- Have rules for how many children are allowed in each center at once.
- Have children clean up their materials before going to the next center.

As children are playing, teachers can teach as they move about the room interacting with individuals and small groups of children. By starting conversations, adding new information, and asking open ended questions about the play, teachers can easily recognize children’s skill and understanding and then extend it.

## Teachers who have conversations with children about their play teach with every interaction.

Conversation Starters:

- Ask open ended questions, such as:
  - How did you decide what to paint?
  - Wow! Tell me about what you’re making.
  - How did you build your garage?
  - Why do you like zebras and tigers?
  - What do you like about cooking breakfast?
- Ask follow up questions when a child talks about their play.
- Add new information a child might be interested in, such as math, social, or science concepts related to their play.
- Share your favorites related to their play and why they are favorites. Then, ask about the child’s likes and dislikes.

*“Play is not frivolous; it is brain building.”*  
 AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS



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