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## Promoting Play-Based Learning at Home

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Promoting Play-Based Learning at Home

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A Literature Review Presented

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Early Childhood Education

April 18th, 2020

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### Abstract

This literature review discusses how teachers can help parents implement play-based learning in their own homes. The review first looks at what play-based-learning is, why it is developmentally appropriate in the early years, and how it has evolved and been used throughout the years. The review will discuss legislation that has made it difficult to practice play-based learning in the classroom and how promoting parental involvement is one way that we can overcome this push-down of developmentally inappropriate practices. Home-visits, take-home kits, and technology are then reviewed as viable ways to introduce parents to play-based learning and help them implement it in their own homes.

### Promoting Play-Based Learning at Home

When parents walk into a preschool classroom, they will likely observe children playing. What parents may not realize is that it may just look like the child is playing, but in reality those children are practicing social, early literacy, mathematical, cognitive, and language skills (Bergen, 2018; Kessel, 2018; Lynch, 2015; Myck-Wayne, 2010). Play-based learning should be valued not only for academic skills, but also for self-regulation, emotional control, executive functioning, social understanding, and creativity (Bergen, 2018). Research done on play-based learning has proven that children who have more hands-on experiences in the early stages of life will have stronger brains (Kessel, 2018). Even college students that have received the McArthur “genius” grant reported often that they practiced high level of “small worlds” pretend play as children (Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 1999).

Early childhood educators know the importance of play and make sure to practice it daily in their classroom. The one place where children spend a majority of their time though and may be engaging in practices that are developmentally inappropriate is in their own homes. While students are at home, parents have the opportunity to help their children grow and develop through play. Despite research, many guardians still believe that structured activities have more learning value than play-based learning (Grob, R., Schlesinger, M., Pace, A., Golinkoff, R., & Hirsh-Pasek, K., 2017; Kessel, 2018; Myck-Wayne, 2010). A majority of adults do not understand, or are unclear, about how to provide learning opportunities and how to extend rich play experiences in the home (Bergen, 2018).

We know that parents want what is best for their children when it comes to their education and that their support is crucial to their child’s development. Increased family involvement has been proven to enhance student academic achievement (Floyd & Vernon-

Dotson, 2009, p. 1). Very frequently in home-visits and conferences that I have conducted for my preschool students, there is always one question that parents ask, and that question is “How can I help prepare my child for kindergarten?” Advocating for parents to practice play-based learning in their home will give children developmentally appropriate instruction and provide structure for future academic success. This literature review addresses how teachers can encourage parents to implement play-based learning in their homes. Even with the push down from state standards and legislation provisions (Repko-Erwin, 2017), teachers can make play-based learning a priority for parents. Take-home kits, technology, and home-visits will all be explored as avenues to reach and guide parents through what play-based learning is and how they can implement it with their own child.

### **Review of the Literature**

Play-based learning can be described as children being given the opportunity to learn naturally as they engage with experiences and master new skills (Kessel, 2018). Research has shown that play is an essential part of the learning process and practiced to expedite a variety of social, cognitive, motor, linguistic, mathematical, language, and literacy improvements (Lynch, 2015; Manz, 2012; Myck-Wayne, 2010). In play children are learning all of this valuable information, building a variety of skills, and enjoying the act of learning all in a developmentally appropriate way. While memorization activities, whole-group instruction, and academic-focused activities may seem easier and more effective, these activities are developmentally inappropriate for young children whose brains are not fully developed for these types of learning (Bergen, 2018; Grob, R., Schlesinger, Pace, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2017; Lynch, 2015; Kessel, 2018). Focusing on play that is in the child’s realm of development should be viewed as a valuable activity that “enables children to develop a wide variety of social and academic skills” (Lynch,

2015, p. 2). Developmentally appropriate practices used in a child's early education leads to better education outcomes in the future (Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu, & Yuan, 2016).

Lev Vygotsky's constructivist approach was focused on the idea that children learn from the environment and interactions that they have in the classroom (Kessel, 2018). Vygotsky's theory, "the zone of proximal development," is based on the idea that play is the leading source of development in the preschool years and provides the children opportunities to behave in advanced ways of his or her typical behavior (Myck-Wayne, 2010). While a child is working in this zone of proximal development and on the verge of learning a new concept, the student can benefit from the interaction with a teacher or a classmate (Mooney, 2006). Children also have the ability to learn these new concepts and gain vital interactions while they are in their own homes playing with their guardians. Parental involvement in play-based-learning while at home can provide these interactions that promote academic and social skills in a developmentally appropriate way.

In the home, play may be looked at as an activity that the child may be doing in a joyful manner, but may have no specific purpose (Grob, Schlesinger, Pace, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2017, p. 1420). Whereas skills can be obtained this way, it is also important to practice guided play in the home. Guided play occurs when play is child directed, but supported by an adult with a specific learning goal in mind. In order for us to help parents understand the importance of guided play and how to use it, we first have to assess what the parents' current views are on play-based learning.

How parents perceive play varies across cultures, socioeconomic status, and education levels (Manz & Bracaliello, 2016; Stagg-Peterson, Portier, Murray, 2017). The positive beliefs of play among parents have been associated with positive outcomes for children. On the other

hand, parents who did not hold these positive beliefs were not as interactive in peer play with their children (Manz & Bracaliello, 2016). Parents' opinions about play are important for us as educators to know. This information allows us to know how to present play and play-based learning so teachers can have an impact on student academic outcomes by shaping the parent's current views. Clearly articulating play activities that support learning outcomes to parents should be practiced by both teachers and supporting school administration so that the importance of this practice is shared (Stagg Peterson, Portier, & Murray, 2017). Also understanding that supporting activities in which the families are already engaged can help meet the barriers that different cultural beliefs, economic statuses, and educational levels may impose (Hamlin, & Flessa, 2018). The one advantage we have as educators in this position is that most Latino and Euro-American parents in the US with education levels ranging from elementary school to university often have beliefs that play is a mechanism for learning in early childhood (Manz & Bracaliello, 2016; Stagg Peterson, S., Portier, C. and Murray, A., 2017). Once this belief has been established by parents, we then have the ability to implement parental involvement strategies that will encourage parents to use these practices in the home.

Parental involvement is considered a partnership among families, schools, and communities (Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu, & Yuan, 2016) The six types of parental involvement described by Epstein consists of a framework that focuses on the roles of the school and community to involve parents. Written by Epstein, type 4 involvement is providing families with information and education to help parents carry out curriculum activities at home (Epstein, 2005). Parental involvement has been shown to have a stronger influence on young children's achievement than that of children in the later years, such as in the elementary and high school grades (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004, p. 4). If we want parents to use the

practices that we know to be developmentally appropriate and impactful, we need to use the most up-to-date avenues to reach parents and promote parental involvement.

### **History**

Preschool programs began in the early 20th century to foster young children's cognitive development (Bergen, 2018). Many theorists and early childhood educators since then have weighed in on the importance of play-based learning and the impacts of parental involvement. Education was generally looked at as the responsibility of educators, and parental involvement was ignored or downplayed. Once declines in the educational outcomes of students and changes in the social demographics of families were linked, parental involvement became more of a priority in education and policy (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005). In the 1960s a program called Head Start was developed that focused on educational interventions for economically disadvantaged preschool children. This program includes high parental involvement and has a primary goal of increasing school readiness for U.S. children living in poverty (Becker, Patterson, Fagan, & Whitaker, 2016; Fishel & Ramirez, 2005).

Shortly after, other federal projects followed that increased the parents' roles in their children's education by increasing consultation and collaboration between teachers and parents (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005, p. 372). Some of these projects include Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), Project Follow Through (1968), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1975), and more recently in the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005). All of these acts focused on the importance of parental involvement as a factor in the academic success and well-being at school (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005). The No Child Left Behind Act is the federal project that has had a large impact on play-based learning and parental

involvement in the early childhood classroom (Epstein, 2005; Kessel, 2018; Lynch, 2015; Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu, & Yuan, 2016; Repko-Erwin, 2017).

### **No Child Left Behind**

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) passed in 2001 has been praised for its goal of increasing all students' learning, but has also been criticized for overemphasizing standardized testing and the push down of academics that it has caused in early childhood classrooms (Epstein, 2005; Lynch, 2015; Repko-Erwin, 2017). NCLB's stipulations of the American educational system requires a reduced achievement gap between various groups of children. These requirements have led to an increase in student standardized testing (Lynch, 2015) This standards and accountability movement has led to the push down of academics into kindergarten classrooms that has diminished the importance of play in the classroom and instead has expected more young students to engage in direct academic instruction at the very beginning of kindergarten (Repko-Erwin, 2017). NCLB does not only affect kindergarten classrooms, but these high-stakes standardized tests are now prompting kindergarten teachers and policymakers to place more responsibility on preschool colleagues to "prepare children for kindergarten" (Repko-Erwin, 2017). Since it is becoming more of a fact that we are seeing less time set aside for play-based learning in the classroom, it is teachers' responsibility to engage parents in this type of learning in the home by developing means of parental involvement (Lynch, 2015). The NCLB requirements emphasize parental involvement as a requirement to receive Title I funding (Epstein, 2005).

Since the mandating of parental involvement by NCLB, "there is little doubt that parent involvement is important to educational success" (Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu, & Yuan, 2016, p. 773). Epstein states "that students learn and grow at home, at school, and in their communities, and

that they are influenced and assisted by their families, teachers, principals, and others in the community” (Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu, & Yuan, 2016, p. 773). The NCLB law activates the theory of these overlapping spheres of influences, which means that students will learn more and better when the home, school, and community share equal responsibility for the student’s success (Epstein, 2005). This common goal in theories of NCLB and Epstein opens the door for schools as a starting point in parental involvement. Many parents want to be involved in their child’s education, but schools lack the programs and open lines of communication for involvement to happen effectively (Epstein, 2005). Even if the district is not opening these lines of communication, there are still means of encouraging parental involvement and play-based learning on the part of the teachers. Some of the avenues that can be explored by teachers are take-home kits, home-visits, and proper use of technology.

### **Application**

#### **Home-Visits**

Starting the school year off with a home visit is one way that teachers can promote and help parents implement play-based learning in the home. Home visits have been used by programs such as The Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) and Head Start dating back to the sixties (Piotrkowski & Brooks-Gunn, 1999; Manz, 2012). These programs vary in their approach, but both are service delivery models that improve children’s health, developmental, and educational outcomes. These programs, along with many more, have all come to recognize that parents are the pivotal mechanism when it comes to development of a child’s early learning and development (Bracaliello & Manz, 2016). They are designed to provide support to families that will improve the home environment and the child’s relationship with the caregivers by providing resources, modeling developmentally appropriate practices, and

opening lines of communication between the teachers and the caregivers (Becker & Patterson & Fagan & Whitaker, 2016). Home-visits have been established as a beneficial way to form necessary constructive relationships with parents that allow for two-way communication because of the potentially less threatening way that teachers are able to introduce themselves and communicate with parents (Meyer & Mann & Becker, 2011). When positive relationships have been developed, teachers will be able to use home-visits to promote play-based learning in the home.

Since there has been a positive association between parents' beliefs about the importance and involvement in play, it is crucial that during home-visits teachers intentionally educate parents about play and how it affects a child's development (Meyer & Mann & Becker, 2011). Providing resources and having open discussions about the importance of one-on-one play in the home gives teachers the opportunity to build positive beliefs around play-based learning. When a positive association between play and school readiness has been established, then the teacher can model how to interact and play with the child using play-based practices. By modeling and scaffolding high-quality instruction through play-based practices, parents can observe and acquire the skills that add significant variance in the prediction of IQ and academic achievement for their children first through third grades (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Byron, 2004).

While it may seem easier to hold school events that can teach these important skills to a larger audience, there may be barriers that prevent parents from attending. Some of these barriers may be the following: they have a child with a disability, they are isolated by community placement or cultural differences, or their time may be consumed because they have to provide basic needs for their children (Floyd & Vernon-Dotson, 2009). Meeting the parents in the comfort of their own home, at a time that is convenient for them, helps break down some of these barriers

and allows teachers to promote play-based learning. After those barriers have been broken down, teachers may look at other avenues, like take-home kits and technology, to enhance play-based learning in the home.

### **Take-Home Kits**

Another way that teachers can help parents implement play-based learning in the home is with take-home kits. Using take-home kits gives teachers the unique ability to send home materials that are specialized to each student's individualized interests and provide parents with developmentally appropriate activities to practice. The No Child Left Behind Act has forced schools to find creative ways to increase family participation, and take-home kits are a way that increases the quality and quantity of parental participation at home (Floyd & Vernon-Dotson, 2009). Through research, activities have been discovered as open-ended, engaging, and effective with parents and students.

Calabrese (2002) conducted a study where they sent home literacy take-home kits that included activities relating to stories. She discovered that there was an overwhelming positive response from parents about how they could implement the strategies from the kits and how they felt more involved in their child's education. By providing parents with specific suggestions in the take-home kits, it allowed them to extend school learning into the home (Calabrese). Some teachers have found it effective to design their kits to specifically cover the state standards or standard course of study in order to keep up with the demands of state requirements (Floyd & Vernon-Dotson, 2016). One of the advantages of using play-based learning is that if you send home a take-home kit that you are designing to cover a specific standard, it is likely that it will cover much more as the children manipulate and engage with the materials. One of the great examples from Calabrese is a literacy bag that contains a story book about building and blocks.

While it may have been designed to practice literacy skills, it could also cover language, fine-motor, mathematical, and cognitive skills.

Acquiring materials and funding for take-home-kits can be one challenge that teachers face. Being resourceful and creative can help overcome this challenge. One university professor found a way to use bottle caps to create Cap Kits that supported literacy and math skills in the home environment (Sanderson, 2017). The kits included 124 plastic bottle caps labeled with numbers, numerical symbols, uppercase and lowercase letters, and blank caps for creative discretion. The students were able to take the caps home and use lists of games that could be found online and utilized by parents. Labeled or unlabeled, these types of manipulatives are the kinds of resources that teachers can use to help promote play-based learning in the home.

It is important when sending these types of manipulatives home that you also send home examples of how they can be used for play-based learning. A parent that is not yet educated in play-based learning may use the materials in ways that are not developmentally appropriate. Making a list of open-ended activities that parents can not only read, but possibly observe through home-visits or accessible technology, will help curbe improper use of the materials. When home-visits or take-home kits are not an option, communication through technology may become a more useful resource for family involvement and play-based learning.

### **Technology**

The classroom will contain students with families that teachers may feel are a bit more elusive and standoffish than others. Even if home-visits are conducted and take-home kits are sent, the teacher may not feel that they are connecting and enhancing play-based learning at home with them the way that they would like to be. Using technology has become an increasingly effective, cost efficient, and easy way to communicate with families who may not

otherwise participate in their child's education. The technologies that teachers can use to promote play-based learning in the home are email, applications, phone calls, blogs, and online conferencing programs. Even something as simple as texting for reminders about upcoming tests and homework has been proven to have a positive impact on math and English attainment (Quigley, 2018). Whereas all of these technologies can be used successfully, for the purpose of promoting play-based learning in the home, video can be considered as one of the more promising technologies (Walsh, Romo, & Jeon, 2018).

To help parents implement play-based learning in the home, video can be used as an option so that modeling and explanations can be given to the parent. This is a visual medium that parents can watch on their own time and however many times is needed in order for them to understand the concept being discussed. Video with audio can help overcome time restraints and language barriers as the parents view the videos on their own time; videos give parents the confidence to be their child's first effective teacher. Encouraging parents to also co-watch the video with their child helps give the child some responsibility in their own education. In a study performed by Walsh, Romo, and Jeon (2018) it was discovered that the benefits of using technology were enhanced when the students and the parents used it together (Walsh, Romo, & Jean). Using video enables the teacher to make learning engaging enough for the students to participate and practice with the families in their own homes.

One of the ways that videos can be shared with families and students is through simple applications that can be accessed through smart phones, computers, and tablets. In order to make parents willing to participate, teachers have to make sure that the programs that they use are easily downloadable and free. There are dozens of free online apps that teachers can utilize to upload videos and audio that families can watch at home together. These apps can also help

bridge the classroom to home by using features that allow students to share what they are practicing through play-based learning both at home and in the classroom. Students can share what they are practicing through student portfolios and messaging between the guardians and the teachers.

Applications with student portfolios allow students to upload videos and pictures of themselves using the same techniques in the classroom that are being discussed through the videos sent home by the teachers. One example may be a student sorting all of the loose parts in the discovery center. A student may want to show their guardians how they are practicing play-based learning in the classroom. Students can show their work by using tablets available in the classroom to upload a snapshot through applications. This activity can then be used, replicated, and even extended on at home. Using this technology can help parents become participants in their child's education and give them the opportunity to do it in a developmentally appropriate way.

A few challenges that teachers may face when it comes to using technology to implement play-based learning in the home is the lack of prior knowledge when it comes to the programs and the accessibility to them. Smartphones, computers, and tablets are in a majority of homes, and parent's access to technology abounds (Walsh, Romo, & Jeon, 2018). However, there may be families that do not have access to these forms of technology. Finding alternate forms of communication to get the information to them is important. In these rare cases families may want the videos emailed to them, while some may want paper copies with bullets of the information. Differentiating for each family is important as teachers provide the information that will help their child learn through developmentally appropriate practices in ways that fit every family.

### **Conclusion**

Educating parents through home-visits, take-home kits, and technology allows teachers to help parents participate in their child's education at home by practicing developmentally appropriate practices, such as play-based learning. As less and less play is used in the classroom as a crucial technique for learning because of high standards from No Child Left Behind and push down from higher grades, it will fall on the parents to help supplement this important type of learning. By taking advantage of the requirement of the No Child Left Behind Act, teachers can use funds and resources to help parents become partners in their child's education in their own homes. Educating parents about the importance of this type of learning and teaching them how to implement it is how we can promote play-based learning in the home.

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