



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of Contemporary Early Childhood Education**

## **Guided Play**

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When thinking about a child's day, it is common to classify time as playtime (e.g., recess, free play on the playroom floor) or instructional time (e.g., direct instruction in class, worksheets for homework). Indeed, many schools are decreasing recess in favor of direct instruction. However, recent research suggests that a "sweet spot" for learning exists between these two extremes. Guided play, in which a more experienced play partner follows a child's lead, but scaffolds the child's learning via exploration, has garnered much support. This entry reviews this evidence, discusses the benefits of this method, and offers suggestions on how to incorporate guided play in early childhood education settings.

Think about a child learning about shapes. One vision calls to mind a room of students sitting quietly and using worksheets. Another envisions a class playing with a box of shapes but without teacher support. Between these two extremes lies a third alternative.

One can imagine a teacher sitting with students and presenting them with a variety of triangles and other shapes—some isosceles triangles, some fat triangles, some triangles with one acute angle that renders them thin, and some non-triangles with partially open sides. After children play, one child holds up an equilateral triangle and says, "This is a triangle!" The teacher then picks up a skinny triangle and asks the group, "Is this a triangle?" Some children say yes and others aren't sure. The teacher then asks, "Why do you think this is a triangle?" The teacher—*qua* coach—works with children's responses to encourage them to understand and articulate what all triangles have in common: three closed sides and three corners.

While it may seem more efficient to *tell* children what a triangle is, children given the opportunity to explore and discover this for themselves will know more about triangles than those who were simply told. Kelly Fisher and colleagues found that children who learned via *guided play*, in which the teacher scaffolded their understanding, showed better learning compared to children just told and to children encouraged to play with shapes on their own. This was especially true for when it came to transferring their shape knowledge to new instances.

The benefits of guided play exist beyond spatial cognition. Researchers such as Geetha Ramani and Robert Siegler found that playing linear math board games has long-lasting benefits for low-income students. Others note benefits of guided play for language learning and literacy. Indeed, support for this kind of playful learning has appeared across hundreds of studies. Louis Alfieri and colleagues completed a meta-analysis comparing unassisted discovery (free play), explicit instruction, and enhanced discovery (guided play). Guided play resulted in the best learning in most circumstances. When adults have a learning goal in mind, guided play is optimal. Guided play requires active, "minds-on" learning, breeds engagement, makes the material meaningful by encouraging the child to link it to previous knowledge, and often involves high-quality social interaction with an adult. Guided play engages children at their "sweet spot," inviting them to participate and actually think.

Why might guided play offer an effective pedagogy? At first glance, it would appear that direct instruction should promote the best learning. In these contexts, we tell children exactly what we want them to learn. There is no ambiguity. However, a recent proposal by Deena Weisberg and colleagues suggests that guided play may work because it allows children to adopt a positive mindset toward schooling, encouraging them to be agents in their own learning while adults scaffold them toward a curricular goal. Called *mis en place*, this element sets the stage, supporting engagement and questioning. Indeed, Elizabeth Bonawitz and colleagues

discuss the “double-edged sword” of pedagogy. When we tell children what we want them to know, it appears that they assume that this instructed information is *all* there is to know; they are no longer willing to engage in exploratory play. They will do what we want them to do without further engagement with the task.

How might one use guided play in early childhood education? The teachers’ role is crucial. They must prepare the lesson with a learning goal in mind, but must allow the child to direct the experience. A teacher attempting to teach a lesson about multiplication and division may put circles (chocolate chips) on the table and tell children to pretend they are bakers creating cookies. If children follow this narrative and explore how to distribute the chocolate chips among the cookies, they may stay active and minds-on while avoiding distraction. Without the teacher, these are just circles on a table; but with the adult supporting this play with a learning goal, this high-quality social interaction quickly becomes a meaningful mathematics lesson, putting children in the most receptive mindset for learning. There need not be tension between free play and didactic instruction. Guided play highlights what is to be learned through inviting children’s participation and maximizing learning.

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**See also** Child-Initiated Learning; Child-Initiated Play; Play, Benefits of; Play, Nature of; Play and Early Childhood Education

### Further Readings

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