

Play at the Center of the Curriculum

SIXTH EDITION



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PEARSON

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This book is dedicated to Millie Almy, beloved mentor to our study of children's play, and to Patricia Monighan Nourot, our beloved co-author, whose life and scholarship were testaments to the power and joy of play.

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PREFACE

In this sixth edition of *Play at the Center of the Curriculum*, we reaffirm our commitment to play in the early childhood classroom. This is an important time and opportunity for informed innovations in the way we educate young children. And early childhood is an important time in the lives of our future citizens. The stakes are enormous.

Today, children have fewer opportunities to play in schools and communities. At the same time, the natural link between play and development is becoming increasingly recognized. This is a time to reconcile early childhood education practices with developmental theory, research, and the wisdom of practitioners. Developmental theory shows that play is critical to the development of intelligence, personality, competencies, a sense of self, and social awareness. Research evidence shows that play supports learning across all domains of children's development.

Therefore, we believe that a developmentally appropriate, holistic, and integrated early childhood curriculum has play at its center. We demonstrate how play can be drawn on to improve developmentally based early childhood education. We propose that play is a critical dimension to children's learning and development throughout the preschool, kindergarten, and primary-grade years.

We believe that an ideal early childhood classroom is characterized by an abundance of play. Our experience tells us that teachers can learn to structure the early childhood classroom environment and to sequence classroom routines so that the learning expectations for children are embedded in spontaneous and guided play activity.

It has always been important that educators assure the community that its youth will receive the necessary abilities and skills to be productive citizens. In many schools, the articulation of academic expectations and standards represents an attempt to meet this responsibility. In this edition, we pay particular attention to demonstrating how developmentally appropriate standards can be met in a play-centered curriculum.

. . . [A]lmost all children can play well . . . [P]lay teaches children how to be sociable and channels cognitive development . . . These capacities serve people lifelong once they go to work (Sennet, 2008, p. 268).

Play at the Center of the Curriculum carefully blends theory and practice. As seasoned teachers, we demonstrate how to draw both the methods and the content of a successful curriculum from children's play. We interweave vignettes of children's play, theories of play and development, and instructional strategies and guidelines that place play at the center of the curriculum.

By combining sound theory and research with practical illustrations, *Play at the Center of the Curriculum* achieves a solid argument for play. Teachers and students in

the field of early childhood education will find this book to be a valuable resource. This is not merely a “how-to” book, nor is it simply a “thought” book. Rather, it is a blending of each, serving the reader in a number of ways.

Play at the Center of the Curriculum is a resource for those who want to engage children in a developmental zone where children and teachers are learning from and with each other. Current and future teachers are guided in methods of supporting children’s progress through play. The teacher becomes the architect of the learning environment, using play and development as the blueprint.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

- This sixth edition is updated to include discussions of current topics in early childhood education that relate to play in early childhood practice and policy. New vignettes from classrooms link current best practices with theory and empirical research. Scores of new resources are cited throughout.
- The new chapter feature *Family Diversity* illustrates the many ways that the play-centered curriculum provides an inclusive, welcoming program for all children and families. We expand our emphasis on diversity in this new edition. Chapters provide more discussion and examples of how educators build on the children’s strengths and meet the needs of children with special needs as well as children from diverse backgrounds and cultures, including children who are dual language learners.
- Each chapter has been organized with new pedagogical features to enhance students’ learning: *Learning Outcomes*, *Summaries*, and *Applying Your Knowledge*. Chapters begin with a list of key learning outcomes to give readers an overview of the focus of the chapter. Chapter summaries highlight key concepts and review main points. The feature *Applying Your Knowledge* concludes each chapter so readers can assess their understandings of key concepts and consider practical applications in programs for young children.
- This sixth edition introduces the new focus on *advocating for play*. Early childhood professionals are advocates for play practices and policies that benefit children. In the first chapter we describe the many ways that early childhood educators and students can become informed advocates for play at multiple levels, from daily acts of advocacy with children, families, and colleagues to working together to affect public policy. Several chapters throughout the text include a new feature called *Advocacy in Action*. Case studies and vignettes portray teachers advocating for play as they develop environments and experiences for children’s play, promote families’ understanding of the importance of play, and advocate successfully for policies that make a difference in children’s lives. The last chapter concludes with resources that educators can use to advocate for play with links to online resources.

- The mathematics and science chapters (Chapters 7 and 9, respectively) have been thoroughly revised and reorganized based on current frameworks and standards. Core concepts and processes are included. The science chapter reflects the inclusion of engineering and technology in the science framework and standards. We underscore that engineering and technology are important dimensions of traditional early childhood programs that provide opportunities for children’s constructive play.
- There is increased emphasis on promoting children’s health, well-being, and safety. The revised chapter on outdoor play (Chapter 12) features numerous practical strategies and resources for teachers and further emphasizes the contributions of outdoor play to children’s healthy development and growth. We include an expanded section that clearly defines rough and tumble play and discusses its importance in development. The revised chapter on toys and technology (Chapter 13) considers the benefits and risks of new media technology and recommends guidelines for using screen technology in ways that support children’s health, well-being, and developing competencies.

ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

This text has been written for students with varying experience and knowledge. Chapters 1 through 6 are designed to form foundational concepts and principles. We recommend that these be read first.

Chapter 1 presents a rationale and framework for play at the center of a balanced, developmentally based curriculum. Numerous examples illustrate how teachers balance spontaneous and guided play with teacher-planned activities to support children’s learning and meet program expectations.

Chapters 2 and 3 introduce theory and research that support our understanding of play and development. The reader is introduced to the ideas of major figures in developmental theory—Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, and Mead—as well as to the work of contemporary researchers. We provide perspectives on how play supports the development of children’s symbolic thought, language and literacy, logical–mathematical thinking, problem solving, imagination, and creativity.

Chapters 4 and 5 bring this developmental focus back to the reality of the classroom. We explore the teacher’s role in setting the stage, actively guiding, and orchestrating play. These chapters show the many factors regarding intervention strategies, environments, materials, and timing that educators consider in program implementation. The issue of how teachers might respond to violent and aggressive play is addressed through vignettes and practical strategies.

Chapter 6 looks at the many ways that play can be used to assess children’s developmental progress and describes play-centered approaches to authentic assessment. Included are many examples of play that embed state and national curriculum standards.

Chapters 7 through 11 explore curriculum areas that are of interest to contemporary early childhood education: mathematics, language and literacy, science,

the arts, and socialization. Each content area chapter begins with a vignette that focuses on how the curriculum is embedded in the children's spontaneous play. The chapters describe how spontaneous and guided play provide balance to teacher-planned activities. The reader will find a rich palette of practical ideas for the articulation of the play-centered curriculum. Throughout these chapters, we discuss how teachers respond to the challenge of our ever-more ethnically and culturally diverse classrooms as well as meeting expectations and standards in a developmentally appropriate manner.

Chapter 12 advocates for the importance of outdoor play to promote children's health and well-being. Outdoor play involves children in physical activity, engagement with nature, as well as opportunities for self-initiated play and inquiry. The place for children's rough and tumble play in school settings is discussed extensively. This chapter presents best practices in planning, observing, interpreting, and assessing young children's outdoor play.

The chapters on science and outdoor play develop the text's emphasis on the importance of developing children's connection with nature and the environment. New curriculum has been added to the art chapter foregrounding novel ways to enhance children's engagement with natural materials.

Chapter 13 looks at ways in which play, toys, and media technology interact to affect the young child's life. We present many ideas and observations useful to teachers and families on the roles of toys and games. We recommend guidelines for the use of media technology to support children's health and developing competencies.

Depending on the background of students, instructors can vary the order of these chapters and draw on some of the suggested resources to extend students' understanding. Chapters 7 through 13 can be assigned in an order that is compatible with the instructor's course structure.

Chapter 14 extends understandings of developmental theory and play, expanding on the constructivist views presented by Piaget and Vygotsky in Chapters 2 and 3. The role of play in developing intelligence, personality, competency, and sense of self is explored. We pay particular attention to the role of work and autonomy in the early childhood years as they relate to the broader goals of education. This chapter will be more meaningful after reading the more experience-focused chapters that have preceded it.

KEY FEATURES OF THIS TEXT

Appropriate Practice for All Children: An Integrated Approach

An inclusive, play-based curriculum recognizes the individual and cultural differences of all children not as "add-ons" but as an integral way to enrich the curriculum. Play-centered curricula build on the strengths as well as the challenges of children with special needs. Throughout this book we discuss how a play-centered

curriculum incorporates children's diverse heritages, cultures, languages, and family backgrounds.

Vignettes

Each chapter anchors its focus in the world of children by beginning with a vignette related to play and education. Numerous additional classroom vignettes are provided throughout each chapter. These practical observations ground the reader in day-to-day educational experiences.

Learning Outcomes, Summary, and Applying Your Knowledge

Each chapter begins with a list of the most important learning outcomes to give readers an overview of the focus of the chapter. Chapter summaries highlight key concepts and review main points. The feature Applying Your Knowledge concludes each chapter so readers can assess their understandings of key concepts and consider practical applications in programs for young children.

Play Advocacy

In this text we emphasize advocacy as a dimension of professional practice. Chapter sections and special features on play advocacy support readers in becoming informed and effective advocates for play. We recognize multiple ways that early childhood educators advocate for play in schools and communities as well as at the state and national levels. Teachers promote play through “daily acts of advocacy” by maintaining nurturing, appropriate environments and experiences for children as they learn and grow. They advocate for play as they show families and colleagues how play supports children's development and learning. Early childhood educators work together as informed, persistent advocates for public policies that promote play and benefit children. Case studies of successful play advocacy efforts empower future teachers to participate in a community of change. Recommended books, resources, and links to professional organizations that promote play advocacy are included.

INSTRUCTOR RESOURCES

Online Instructor's Resource Manual

This manual is written for instructors teaching courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. It includes suggested approaches for using this text as well as chapter-by-chapter guides, ideas for projects—both in and out of class—and suggested resources for further study.

Online Test Bank

The Test Bank includes a variety of test items, including essay, multiple-choice, and short-answer questions.

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CHAPTER 1

Looking at Play Through Teachers' Eyes



LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Write a rationale for placing play at the center of the early childhood curriculum.
- Describe a model and important considerations for implementing a play-centered curriculum. Define spontaneous play, guided play, and teacher-directed play.
- Summarize the main points discussed by each of four teachers who were interviewed.
- Explain how the NAEYC's position on developmentally appropriate practice relates to spontaneous or guided play.
- Discuss challenges and opportunities related to the development and implementation of standards for young children's learning and development.
- Explain why the teacher's role is critical to the quality of a play-centered curriculum.
- Describe several things teachers can do to become more informed advocates for play.

With dramatic gestures, Brandon loudly sings, "Can you milk my cow?" After he and his kindergarten classmates finish the song with a rousing, "Yes, ma'am!" their teacher, Anna, calls on Becky and Tino to figure out the date and count the number of days the children have been to school. (This is the 26th day.) As other children join in the counting, Brandon takes a toy car out of his pocket. He spins the wheels, turns around, and shows it to Chris. After a moment, he reaches out to touch Kara's shoelaces, whispering, "I have snaps." Then he opens and refastens the Velcro snaps on his shoes.

Anna announces that it's choice time and calls on children to leave the circle and go to the activities of their choice. Brandon sits up straight, wanting to be called on and ready to start. The moment his name is called, he heads to the housekeeping area, where Chris and Andy are opening some cupboards. Brandon announces: "I'll make breakfast." (He picks up the coffee pot.) "Here's coffee." (He pretends to pour a cup and gives it to Chris.)

Mary, a new student in the class, wanders into the housekeeping area holding the pet rat. Brandon interrupts his breakfast preparation and says to Mary, "You can't bring Fluffy in here. You have to keep her near her cage."

Within a few minutes, the theme of the children's play turns from eating to firefighting. Brandon and Andy go to the block area to get some long block "hoses." They spend a few minutes there pretending to hose down several block construction "fires." Brandon knocks one down, to the angry cries of the builders, Valerie and Paul. He then transforms the block hose into a gun, which he uses to shoot at them.

As he and Andy stomp about the block area, Brandon passes Mary, still holding the rat, and says to her, "That's too tight. See, like this." He takes

the rat from her, cradles it, looks it in the eyes, and pats it. "Fluffy was at my house during vacation. I got to feed her. See, she remembers me."

Brandon, Andy, and Mary spend the next 10 minutes building a house and a maze for Fluffy. Brandon has chosen to play in the block area each day for more than a month. The children gather five arches for a roof, partially covering a rectangular enclosure they have made by stacking blocks horizontally using long blocks and, when none are left, two shorter blocks placed side by side.

After building the "roof," Brandon rushes to a nearby table, where Rotha and Kai are chatting and drawing. He grabs a piece of paper and hastily scribbles on the middle of it, knocking off a few templates and scissors in the process. "This is my map. This is my map for the maze," he says. Brandon then goes to his teacher for some tape to put on the maze. He points to a figure on the paper where two lines intersect and says, "See my X? That's where Fluffy gets out." ✂

Every observation of children's play illustrates its multidimensional qualities. By observing Brandon's play for just a short time, we can learn about the way he is developing socially. For example, we see that Brandon is able to join Chris and Andy in their play in the housekeeping area by introducing an appropriate topic, offering to make breakfast. This observation also informs us about Brandon's developing cognitive abilities. In his play, he uses a block to symbolically represent first a hose and then a gun. While building the house for Fluffy, Brandon demonstrates practical knowledge of mathematical equivalencies when he uses two short blocks to equal the length of one longer block. By observing Brandon's play, we witness how he applies his developing abilities in real situations.

This observation also raises some of the many questions that teachers ask about children's play. How should a teacher respond when a child plays during group instruction? How can a teacher balance children's spontaneous play with more teacher-planned activities? Should teachers redirect children when they select the same play materials or themes day after day? Should gun play be allowed? How can play help us understand and assess children's cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical development? How can we be sure we are creating an inclusive curriculum that promotes equity and school success for all? How can a play-centered curriculum address mandated frameworks and standards?

Observing Brandon leads us to the central issue this book addresses: Why should play be at the center of the curriculum in early childhood programs?

PLAY AT THE CENTER OF A DEVELOPMENTALLY BASED CURRICULUM

What is the specific rationale for making play the center of the curriculum? The premise of this book is that play-based early childhood programs place the developmental characteristics of the young child—the learner—at the center of the

curriculum. This book draws on evidence that play is a fundamental activity of early childhood and a central force in young children's development. During early childhood, play is essential and drives young children's development.

The Power of Play in Development

As we describe in the chapters that follow, play is simultaneously a facet of development and the source of energy for development. Play is an expression of the child's developing personality, sense of self, intellect, social capacity, and physicality. At the same time, through their play children direct their energy toward activities of their own choice, which stimulate further development.

Play is essential for optimal development and learning in young children. The match between the characteristics of play and the characteristics of the young child provides a synergy that drives development as no teacher-directed activity can.

However, a play-centered curriculum is not a laissez-faire curriculum in which anything goes. It is a curriculum that uses the power of play to foster children's development. Play fosters all aspects of young children's development from birth through age 8: emotional, social, intellectual, linguistic, and physical. It involves the integration of what children have learned. It is a curriculum in which teachers take an active role in balancing spontaneous play, guided play, teacher-directed play, and teacher-planned activities. Play-centered curricula support children's development and learning in all settings and contexts, both indoors and outside.

In honoring the child's play, we honor the "whole child." We think of the child as a developing "whole" human being in whom the processes of development are integrated. This view contrasts with the ideas that early childhood development involves the linear acquisition of separate skills or that kindergarten and primary-grade children have outgrown the developmental benefits of rich play experiences. These views are not supported by research.

In promoting a play-centered curriculum, we make short- and long-term investments in children's development. In the short term, play creates a classroom atmosphere of cooperation, initiative, and intellectual challenge. If we look at long-term consequences, we find that play supports children's growth in broad, inclusive competencies such as self-direction and industry. These are competencies valued by both parents and educators, and ones that children will need to develop to function as adults in our society.

Throughout this book, we emphasize how curricula in particular areas such as mathematics, language and literacy, science, art, socialization, and technology support and enrich young children's play. This idea contrasts with the widespread notion that play serves merely to support subject-matter competencies. Our view also contrasts with the idea of play traditionally found in the intermediate grades—play as a reward for finishing work.

This does not mean that all play is equal in our eyes. Play is fun, but it is more than fun. Play-centered curricula are not opportunities for teachers to stand aside, but require highly competent, involved, and purposeful teachers. The critical dimension



Play involves interest, motivation, and active engagement.

is to provide conditions that foster children's development using their own sources of energy. In the following chapters we articulate how a play-based curriculum supports children's own developmental forces.

Play as a Fundamental Human Activity

Play is a human phenomenon that occurs across the life span and across cultures. Parents in Mexico teach their babies the clapping game "tortillas," while older children and adults play Loteria. South Asian adolescents play soccer, while younger children play hopping games accompanied by singing. Chinese toddlers clap to a verse celebrating their grandmothers, "banging the gong merrily to accompany me home," while the grandmothers, in their old age, play mahjong. As humans, we not only enjoy our own engagement in play but are also fascinated with the play of others. The entertainment and sports industries reflect the popularity of observing others at play.

Grounding Practice in Theory, Research, and the Wisdom of Practitioners

The idea of play at the center of the early childhood curriculum is grounded in work from four early childhood traditions: (a) early childhood practitioners, (b) theorists and researchers who study play, (c) researchers and theorists in the field of development and learning, and (d) educational historians. These four traditions inform our ideas of play-based practice.

Play and the Wisdom of Practitioners Historically, play has been at the center of early childhood programs. A kindergarten student playing with blocks might spend

an hour focused intently on this task, but might squirm when asked to sit down for 10 minutes to practice writing letters of the alphabet. Early childhood educators have observed and emphasized that young children bring an energy and enthusiasm to their play that not only seems to drive development, but also seems to be an inseparable part of development (e.g., Paley, 2004, 2010).

The Characteristics of Play Theorists who study play suggest possible reasons for its importance in the development of young children when they describe the characteristics of play. According to theorists, play is characterized by one or more of these features: (a) active engagement, (b) intrinsic motivation, (c) attention to means rather than ends, (d) nonliteral behavior, and (e) freedom from external rules.

When young children are actively engaged, we observe their zest and their focused attention. Adults often marvel at children's unwillingness to be distracted from play that interests them. Brandon, for example, shows his genuine desire to be doing what he does, without encouragement from Anna. This is what we mean by **intrinsic motivation**—the desire to engage in an activity arises from within the child. When children are actively engaged and intrinsically motivated, they demonstrate their abilities to use language to communicate with others, solve problems, draw, run and climb, and so on. Children's sense of autonomy, initiative, and industry are rooted in intrinsic motivation and active engagement.

When children pay attention to means rather than ends, we notice that they are less involved with achieving a goal or outcome than with the activity itself and the enjoyment of it. Young children are well aware of the grown-up things they cannot yet do. Even the competencies that are expected of them are often frustrating, such as waiting for a snack, sharing, cutting with scissors, and (in the primary years) learning to read, add and subtract, and carry out simple household chores. In contrast, in their play, children can change the goals and the ways to achieve the goals.

We often sense children's exhilaration as we observe them shifting means and goals as they figure out new ways to solve problems. These open-ended explorations involve opportunities for creative thinking that are lacking in curricula designed for children to arrive at a single, "correct" response (Monighan-Nourot, Scales, Van Hoorn, with Almy, 1987).

Young children's play is often nonliteral pretend play that is not bound by external rules. How is such fantasy play useful to a young child who is learning to function in the real world? Children's symbolic development is fostered through the creation and use of symbols in pretend play as well as in hypothetical, "as if" situations. Through play, children develop boundaries of the real and the imagined and also visions of the possible—the drive that turns the wheels of invention.

Practice, Research, and Theory Early childhood educators have always been guided by theory and research in psychology, anthropology, and sociology as well as education. Support for placing play at the center of the curriculum comes from the work of theorists and researchers from many disciplines who examine the role of play in development and learning.

For more than a century, theorists have explored these links. Their theories and writings reflect the time in which these theorists lived. Therefore, we discuss these theories from current viewpoints that reflect today's concerns and understandings of development. In the chapters that follow, we turn to the work of Piaget and Vygotsky for understanding the importance of play in cognitive development. We turn to Erikson and Mead to understand the role of play in the child's developing sense of self and ability to establish social relationships, and to Vygotsky and Erikson to understand how play might reflect issues of culture and society.

In the 21st century, we find research on young children's play is flourishing. Thirty years ago, there were comparatively few books on children's play, and searches of journals turned up few articles. In the first edition of this text, published in 1993, we pointed out that the literature in the field of children's play had been growing. As we review the research for this sixth edition, we find that empirical research and writing in the field of young children's play is burgeoning—there are hundreds of recent articles in international journals and scores of recent books (e.g., Cohen & Waite-Stupiansky, 2011; Elkind, 2007; Fromberg & Bergen, 2006; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009). In addition, throughout this edition we discuss recent critical thinking that addresses challenges in early childhood education to promote inclusive, multicultural, and peaceful classrooms (e.g., Falk, 2012; Fennimore & Goodwin, 2011; Levin, 2003, 2013).

Play and Traditions of Schooling Writings on the history of schooling also lead us to place play at the center of the early childhood education curriculum. Historians have examined issues such as “What is worth learning?” and, importantly, “Who should learn?” as well as the ways in which formal schools differ from informal apprenticeship structures found in less industrialized, traditional societies (Dewey, 1915).

Early schools in the Middle East and Europe evolved with specific purposes and expectations, such as training scribes who could write official documents. Only select groups of boys attended school during middle childhood and adolescence. Later, as formal schools spread geographically, the reasons for schooling as well as the expectations of what should be learned changed. Several centuries ago, schools often prepared students for particular professions. The number of students attending schools began to grow, and the diversity of students began to increase. The rationale and expectations for schooling continued to change.

During the late 1800s, a greater number of adults needed to have basic competencies in numeracy and literacy, whereas a more elite group of adults needed more technical competencies. It was also during this period and the early 1900s that girls and boys younger than 7 or 8 years of age entered “school-like” settings. For the children of factory workers, these settings were child-care institutions designed to keep children out of harm's way. In contrast, for the children from more affluent families, the settings were nursery schools and kindergarten classes that aimed to support the development of the child. Play comprised a large part of these programs.

By the mid-1950s, the gradual blending of the goals of child care, preschool, kindergarten, and the primary grades frequently led to increased pressure for highly

structured curricula and programs that stressed “academic” skills (Nourot, 2005). Trends in the history of formal schooling as well as current practices lead us to articulate our position that play should be at the center of the early childhood curriculum.

PLAY AT THE CENTER OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM: A MODEL FOR PRACTICE

We consider this a pivotal moment for early childhood educators. We cannot continue educational practices that are failing so many of our youngest students. Young children have fewer rich opportunities for play not only in schools but also at homes and community settings, both indoors and out.

This is also a time rich in possibilities. Researchers and practitioners are learning more about the central role of play in all interrelated facets of development: social-emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and physical. The evidence-based early childhood literature demonstrates the important role of play. This is the time to place play at the center of the curriculum and reconcile program practices with the wisdom of practitioners, theorists, and research.

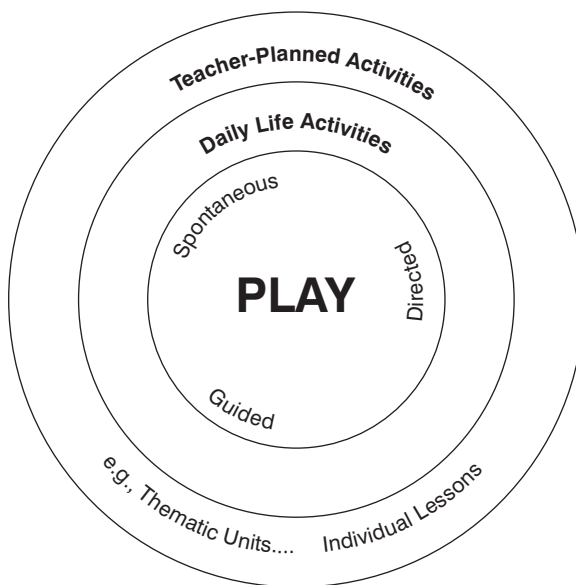
Play-centered programs promote equity because they are built around the strengths of young children rather than their weaknesses. To meet the needs of all children, we recommend preschool–kindergarten programs that are firmly play centered yet complemented by **daily life activities** and some teacher-directed activities. We see first and second grades as transitional years, with play and daily life activities complemented with increased time for teacher-planned activities. In the primary grades, play and work are merged into increasingly complex and extended projects, further integrating play and areas of academic learning.

In our view, education for children from preschool through the primary grades should promote the development of both the competent young child and the competent future adult. This is best accomplished by means of a balanced, play-centered program in which neither spontaneous play nor teacher-planned activities are the only mode. As Figure 1.1 illustrates, play is at the center of a balanced curriculum.

In the play-centered curricula described throughout this book, a constant flow occurs among these three strata. We show how children repeat daily life and teacher-directed activities in their play, how teachers plan daily life activities so that they draw on the power of play, how teachers can develop effective assessment strategies, and how teachers integrate children’s play into the curriculum. We illustrate how daily life activities include preschoolers setting the table, kindergartners planting a garden, first graders writing and mailing their first letters, and second graders learning to tell time. We examine how teacher-planned activities include projects and thematic units as well as subject area units.

In contrast to the common emphasis on **instrumental play** (that is, play used to support subject-matter objectives), we emphasize how curricula in content areas can enrich and support good play. By changing our focus from play to daily life activities to

Figure 1.1
Play at the Center of a
Balanced Curriculum



teacher-planned activities (and always back to play), our view becomes the opposite of the traditional view. When children play, they are intrinsically motivated and engrossed in what interests them most. They are also practicing and developing competencies at the edge of their potential. In play, self-directed learning engages and focuses attention and provides numerous opportunities for all children to develop self-regulation and to practice self-control.

When children are involved in such daily life activities as writing a letter, sending an e-mail message, cleaning up, or learning to tie their shoes, they are engaged in what is important in the lives of the adults around them. The purpose of daily life activities is readily apparent. There are procedures to learn and social rules to obey. This is not necessarily true of play. For example, when a child like Brandon pretends to make coffee for breakfast, he does not have to adhere to the sequence of how an adult makes coffee. He can choose to turn the cup of coffee into a glass of orange juice or a cup of ice cream if he wants to. Play also has rules, but children have more power to determine them.

Children's involvement in play, daily life activities, and teacher-planned activities differs when we compare the rationale for children's activity. Children play because of their own intrinsic interests. In play, no "one task" is imposed on the child by adults. The child does not need to use a sense of will or purposeful intention to meet adult expectations. A sense of will is needed to accomplish tasks or daily life activities that are not of one's choosing. This is self-regulation. Unless teacher-planned activities are developmentally attuned to the children's level, it is difficult for the children to adhere to the task. Prior to middle childhood, most children have difficulty maintaining sufficient willpower to learn such adult competencies as reading or writing.