

Constructive Play in Early Learning Environments

by Alka Burman

Constructive play is an organized form of play that is, in many ways, goal oriented and thoughtful. Children who are engaged in constructive play use materials to create something, and this increases in complexity as they get older.

With its rich capacity to teach children to problem solve, connect, understand and be inquisitive in their play, constructive play is an important part of an early learning environment. It uses open-ended materials and allows children to think about the functions of the materials that they are using. It can involve playing or constructing with three-dimensional materials like blocks, but we also see constructive play with play dough and recycled materials where children get to decide what to make and how to use these materials.

Through constructive play, children learn about the attributes of different materials, engage their curiosity and imagination, and experiment with applying concepts and seeking out new ways to use the materials. When children are actively involved this way, they remember the information they have gathered better than when they are simply given the information. This is the key difference between active and passive learning.

Language and Constructive Play

Through constructive play, children will learn new vocabulary and will understand how to use it in appropriate ways. Constructive play will also increase the complexity of vocabulary through social interactions and will give children experiences making connections between spoken and written words. In constructive play, adults can support word knowledge by writing down what children are saying and providing authentic and rich connections between spoken language and print. Children can also have opportunities to experiment with writing materials and to communicate their ideas with adult support.

Children can attempt to write, scribble on their own or have adults write for them. Teachers can also video record or tape record what children are saying about their constructive play and write down

what they have said, then play it back for children to see and then connect to the written word. Children who are English language learners have real experiences in active learning and will benefit by developing meaningful context for their language learning. In this way, English language learners can socially interact, learn new words and have fun with language through an activity that they find enjoyable.

Mathematics and Constructive Play

Children are able to learn important spatial concepts through constructive play as they come to understand words that define spatial relations like 'below,' 'on top,' 'beside,' 'above,' etc. Children also learn about quantity, measurement, weight, height, size and other concepts that involve mathematical language and numeracy. Constructive play also teaches children about shapes, sorting, matching,



seriation and classification through the different materials that are provided during activities.

Social-emotional Development and Constructive Play

Children learn to interact socially with one another when they are engaged in constructive play. They see that it is more enjoyable to include other's ideas and to work in co-operation with their peers, applying concepts of team work and collaboration. Children also learn about sharing, turn taking, taking risks and contributing toward a common goal. Children will also learn the social skills and knowledge needed to engage in group play and the dynamics and attitudes that may apply. They increase their ability to solve problems, to think creatively and to apply logical reasoning.

Adults Supporting Constructive Play

Children who engage in constructive play will often be involved (with adult support) in controlling and managing various materials while using a wide variety of tools. This includes using items that might help them to join or put things together; inquiring and testing their ideas; solving problems using judgement, reasoning and imagination; and learning about balance, order and the rhythm of design. Adults can support constructive play by having meaningful interactions with children, asking and answering questions, helping children record what they have done, and by creating constructive play spaces that are rich with open-ended materials and that are safe and accessible. As children engage in constructive play, it is recommended that adults provide support to the play, but not direct it.



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