

Play-based learning has many benefits

Do you have a child who is 0-6 years of age? If so, they are in the "Early Years," a critical time in their development. I'm sure that you have noticed that your child is learning and changing every day. There are new words, new movements, and new skills that they are able to do today that they were just experimenting (or practising) with yesterday.

Did you know that your child learns through their play? Play is important! Do not disregard the many skills that your child learns by engaging in play by themselves, with their peers and with you. Many early learning and child care programs like child care centres, preschools, day homes, and out of school cares would describe themselves as play-based.

So what exactly is play-based learning? Don't we want our children ready for school? Can play really help with that? Should they be learning academic things like letters and numbers?

The Council for Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) has written a comprehensive statement on Play-Based Learning comprised of four key elements. First, they say that learning through play is supported by science. During play, children explore, think, problem solve and use language. Research has show that these tasks influence and advance the neural pathways in your child's brain.



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Child Care Chatter

Secondly, learning through play is supported by experts. Experts, such as Lev Vygotsky, have recognized play as the "leading source of development in terms of emotional, social, physical, language or cognitive development."

Next, learning through play is supported by children and parents. Children naturally want to play; it is an intrinsic urge. During play, children "construct, challenge, and expand their own understanding through making connections to prior experiences, thereby opening the door to new learning."

Finally, when children are playing, children are learning. Early Childhood Educators working in child care centers, preschools, out of school care and in day homes, "should intentionally plan and create challenging, dynamic, play-based learning opportunities."

Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) are trained in children's development and are able to create learning opportunities that will work with your child at their developmental level. ECEs get to know your child and learn their interests, needs, and abilities. They take this information into consideration when they plan their activities for the day. In addition, ECEs know how to scaffold your child's learning. This means that they provide just enough assistance to a child for them to

master a skill. This can come through asking open-ended questions, re-stating questions if they are not understood, describing out loud about what they are doing and why, showing and telling a child how to do a task, breaking a task down into manageable parts, giving feedback to children on their actions, etc.

Pretend play is particularly valuable during the early years. Children learn social skills (communication, problem solving and empathy) through pretend play. Taking on a variety of roles in their pretend play allows children to learn more about how others feel and how others may see the world.

When children explore their environment through play, literacy and numeracy skills are developed in a natural context. During the early years, your child does not need flash cards, worksheets, etc., to learn pre-reading and math skills. They need to PLAY! So, next time you visit a local child care centre or day home, be assured of the fact that the play that you see occurring is definitely worth it. Give your Early Childhood Educator a pat on the back for creating a place where your child learns through their play!

For more information on the Medicine Hat & District Child Care Association and its members, check out www.mhdcca.com.

Jennifer Usher is the coordinator of the Medicine Hat & District Child Care Association.

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