The Canadian Association for Young Children exists to provide a Canadian voice on critical issues related to the quality of life of all young children and their families (CAYC Mission Statement). To that end, CAYC creates Position Statements that provide members and the general public with information about issues related to the early years. These statements are meant to be aspirational, thought-provoking and dynamic in nature. CAYC welcomes your feedback.

CAYC Position Statement on Play

CAYC believes that play is and should be promoted as a fundamental right of children. It is “more than mere indulgence; it is essential to children’s health and well-being” (Lester and Russell, 2010). It is the responsibility of adults to understand the importance of play, promote the value of play, and create opportunities for children’s play.

Children Have the Right to Play

CAYC recognizes Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Canada in 1991, recognizes that, “children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities”.

The Benefits of Play

Current research has challenged the future-focused, deferred-benefits view of play. The research suggests that the benefits of play are more immediate and help children to adapt to their current environments, becoming protagonists in their own lives (Erikson in Sutton-Smith, 1997). Play is a young child’s language of exploration, discovery, and expression. Children play to understand the world around them. Therefore, ample time for play is essential in the daily experiences of children and to a family's quality of life.

Researchers studying play have found that:

- Childhood play is integral in the life of the child. Children learn to interact with others, develop communication skills, and to see and solve problems. In play, children make sense of their world and negotiate their place in it. Vivian Paley (2009) describes play as “the only set of circumstances children understand from beginning to end. ‘I can do this well,’ the (children) seem to say. ‘I can be this effectively. I understand what is happening to me and to the other children” (p.61).

- Play provides an important opportunity for children to explore and understand their identities, including sex, gender, and cultural identities, which are created by individuals and within individuals, and influenced by social structures within society (Davies, 2003). This means that children are actively involved in understanding and creating their identities.

- In play, children interpret and represent roles and situations in their everyday lives (Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2003). Children’s competencies are more advanced when they are engaged in pretend play than in other contexts. Skills practiced in play transfer to a child’s everyday behaviour. Vygotsky (1978) describes play as a place where the child can experience being, “a head taller than himself.”

- Play has a unique and vital role in the whole of the educational process (Weininger, 1994). Children skilled in pretend play perform well on cognitive tasks such as verbal comprehension, sequencing, and the understanding of causation (Dansky, 1980). Pretend play supports the child’s theory of mind – the ability to understand that others have beliefs, desires, and intentions separate from one’s own (Early Learning for Every Child Today, 2007).

- Play allows children to take risks in a safe and supportive environment, learning how to recognize and evaluate a challenge, and decide on a course of action (Brossoni, et al., 2015).
• During play, children are empowered to learn on their own terms, in their own ways, and in their own time. Importantly, this freedom is what distinguishes play from other activities (Government of New Brunswick, 2008). Play allows from freedom, spontaneity and possibility (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008; Reiber, 2001; Eberle, 2014).

• Play allows children to take the initiative, to test their physical and mental limits, and to explore positions of power and questions about good and evil (Government of New Brunswick, 2008).

• Play helps children to consider the perspectives of others as they attempt to figure out what their play partners are thinking (Shanker, 2010).

• Play promotes language, literacy and numeracy development by providing children with the opportunity to tell stories, build narrative, and use symbols that are purposeful and relevant to their play (Pelletier, 2011).

• Play reduces stress and allows children to learn self-regulation. Because children are motivated to play, children focus their attention, control their emotions, and practice positive social behaviours (Elias & Berk, 2002).

• Increased screen time has detrimental on effect on children’s learning (Sharif & Sargent, 2006), and their physical and emotional well-being (Ravichandran, de Bravo, & Beauport, 2016) Young children and screen time (National Center for Health Research, 2016).

• When children have opportunities to engage freely with a range of engaging materials they use them to explore ideas, make meaning (Kind, 2010) and represent what they know or are coming to understand. Play with open-ended toys and materials fosters creativity and fosters “new connections between thoughts and objects that bring innovation and change, taking known elements and creating new connections” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.117).

**CAYC believes that:**

**Uninterrupted time for play supports children’s development.**
Children need time to play. During play, children talk, listen, tell stories, build narrative, use logic, and solve problems. These skills are foundational for the development of language, literacy and numeracy. All early learning programs, including school classrooms, must provide time for children’s self-directed play. Teacher-directed experiences, used moderately, are effective in promoting learning if they are play-based (Alliance for Childhood, 2009). Play times need to be long enough for children to develop plans, decide roles, and unfold events.

*Questions for reflection:* Consider the schedule in your centre or classroom. How does it provide time for children to develop in-depth meaningful play experiences? How are decisions made on when play occurs and for how long?

**Regular opportunities for outdoor play are critical for children in developing an environmental consciousness.** In today’s society, children are exposed to more screen time which takes away from their time for active play. Outdoor, active play is essential in all types of environments and weather and allows children to better understand and appreciation nature and the environment.

*Questions for reflection:* What are the barriers that prevent outdoor play in your program or classroom? How could these be reduced?

**High quality environments are important in fostering children’s play.**
All young children have the right to safe, stimulating environments that encourage play. In early childhood, indoors and outdoor environments should be of high quality, designed to provoke curiosity, investigation, and dramatic play. Indoor environments should include elements such as large windows, outdoor light, clean and open spaces for movement and activity; plants and other materials from nature;

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soft and responsive materials; real-life materials instead of plastic replicas (such as dishes and tools), and an array of materials for the arts, construction, and imaginative play. Outdoor spaces should honour the natural world and foster engagement with it.

Questions for reflection: How do your indoor and outdoor environments foster imagination and wonder? What are the limitations that you observe?

Materials for children’s play should be chosen thoughtfully.
Expensive, commercially made toys are not necessarily toys that enhance or scaffold children’s learning and development. Materials should include a wide variety of loose parts/intelligent materials, natural materials, recycled and reused materials, and materials imbued with aesthetic appeal. Educators need to be conscious of the ways in which stereotypes (e.g., gender, racial, cultural, etc.) can be perpetuated through certain play materials. Additionally, consideration should be given to the quality of and the source of play materials procured, with consideration given to where the materials are produced and by whom, what they are made of, how they might affect the environment, their reusability, and their potential for open-ended exploration.

Questions for reflection: How do you choose play materials? What values underlie these choices?

It is the responsibility of adults to understand, support and advocate for children’s play.
Adults need to develop competency in understanding children’s play, so as to enable, support, and scaffold play in all early learning settings of all types. Additionally, adults need to advocate for time, space and opportunities for children’s play in early childcare centres, schools and within communities.

Questions for reflection: What current resources on play do you have and which ones are you interested in acquiring? What opportunities do you have and what more could you do to advocate for play in children’s lives—to parents, to your colleagues, and to policy makers within your community?

Play provides important opportunities for learning about and managing social relationships.
Play provides important opportunities for children to learn about and experience collaboration and cooperation with others. However, play can also provoke disagreement and conflict between children. Conflict arising in children’s play can manifest in arguments, and at times, can even be violent or destructive. As such, moments of conflict can be perceived as “a sign of failed socialization” (Shantz & Hobart, 1989 p.71). However, experiencing and managing conflict in play, and learning how to solve disagreements using problem-based and peaceful approaches, are important aspects of play and in developing children’s social, emotional, cognitive skills.

Questions for reflection: Consider your personal beliefs about conflict; specifically, how conflict was addressed when you were a child and how you address conflict now as an adult. How do you determine when to intervene in children’s conflict? How do you support children when they are working through a conflict with others?
References


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