

Child-Directed Play

Relevant Satellite Accreditation Standards

III. The Daily Program for Children

B. Children learn through self-paced play, and through active engagement with materials, the provider, and other children.

1. Children have opportunities throughout the day to move about, make choices about their activities, and follow their own interests at their own pace. They are active and engaged most of the time.

F. The schedule offers a balance of activities.

1. Most activities are child initiated. Activities planned by the provider are planned according to the interests and abilities of the children.



The Basics

What is child-directed play? Rooted in Piagetian constructivist theory and decades of research displaying its positive implications, *play is the work of children*. Through child-initiated, self-paced play, children explore their world and learn foundational skills that will prepare them for future success in school. Adults play a major role in the learning that arises from child-directed activities. Early childhood teachers observe, reflect, and plan learning opportunities and play materials available to children. These professionals are responsible for guiding children's play and prompting deeper understanding of math, literacy, science, and socioemotional concepts. Through asking open-ended questions, encouraging knowledge sharing, providing descriptive feedback, and modeling, teachers partner with children to scaffold new skills and instill a love of learning.

What about teacher-directed instruction? Through the contemporary push for this idea of learning through play, many early childhood professionals are wondering how teacher-directed instruction fits into the early learning environment. Research suggests that an intentional balance of child-initiated and teacher-initiated instruction is optimal for positive wholistic child outcomes. More specifically, that spending over 60% of instructional time in child-initiated activities, including guided child-directed play, was associated with greater school readiness for preschoolers. For more information and links to the newest research, please see the additional resources linked at the end of this article under "I want to learn more!"

What does this look like in family child care? The multi-age model of family child care provides a unique opportunity for children to learn and develop at their own pace. Family child care educators play a vital role in this individualized learning through engaging in guided play with children throughout the day and pairing children of varying ages together to support peer relationships, a deeper understanding of knowledge for the mentor, and a model for learning new skills for the mentee. Family child care educators can best support the children in their programs by reflecting on their children's individual interests, skills, and preferences to plan learning experiences that are child-directed. This is all dependent on the group of children present in a program at any given time, so an educator's ability to be flexible and fluid in their curriculum topics and instructional methods is vital to their children's success and learning.

I want to learn more!

- [Is More Child-Initiated Always Better? Exploring Relations Between Child-Initiated Instruction and Preschoolers' School Readiness](#)
- [Observing, Planning, Guiding: How an Intentional Teacher Meets Standards through Play](#)
- [The Importance of Play](#)
- [Can Guidance During Play Enhance Children's Learning and Development in Educational Contexts?](#)
- [Learning Through Play at School – A Framework for Policy and Practice](#)
- [Evolutionary Advantages of Free Play During Childhood](#)

This resource is available to you through Satellite Family Child Care System, a YoungStar Connect Partner.

