



Ready, Set, Go

Success for All

An e-Newsletter linking people and resources to support quality practices in the education of all students



The dramatic play area in Mrs. Carrie Ludwig's inclusive Pre-Kindergarten classroom in Frederick County, VA has been transformed, with the help of her students, into a laundromat called Wildcat Wash. There, children are intently engaged in imaginary play; some fold clothes, some hang them on a line, while others are busy writing lists and labels to bring the laundromat to life. Children are also using new vocabulary, counting, recognizing patterns, and using inventive spelling and representational drawing.

A growing body of research demonstrates that play, especially in the early childhood years, lays a solid foundation for learning throughout a child's life (UNICEF, 2018; Zosh et al., 2022). As they freely move about, engage with supportive caretakers and peers, and experiment with the world around them, young children are developing important cognitive, social emotional, and physical skills (National Institute for Play, n.d.). Play research describes a continuum of play, with fully child-initiated *free play* at one end, and adult-directed games at the other end. Research also describes *guided play*, in which adults scaffold children's play. Across the continuum, all types of play are important and provide distinct opportunities for young children to learn and grow (UNICEF, 2018).

Across the country, time spent on literacy and math instruction in kindergarten has increased significantly since the early 2000's (Bassok et al., 2016). As a result of rising academic expectations, some parents and professionals might feel the need to "prepare" young children for kindergarten by limiting playtime. The resources below demonstrate important learning happens while children are engaged in meaningful play and playful learning. Vignettes from VDOE Region 4 School divisions, Manassas City and Frederick County, are included to illustrate the power of play in action.

Get **Ready** to understand what happens when children play

All humans have an innate drive to play (National Institute for Play, n.d.). When children play, they develop neural pathways in the upper brain to support skills that will be used throughout their lifetime, including emotional regulation, creativity, resilience, and social skills (National Institute for Play, n.d.). During playful learning, children are active participants; they are engaged in meaningful, often socially interactive, experiences that help them make sense of the world around them (Zosh et al., 2022). Mrs. Ludwig says, "When you are giving children the opportunity to choose, there is more concentration, focus, and collaboration. During playtime, not a minute is wasted."

The following resources are intended to help caregivers, including families, build background knowledge about what happens when children play.

- [The Power of Playful Learning in the Early Childhood Setting \(NAEYC\)](#)
- [ECF Play Brief](#)
- [The Case of Brain Science and Guided Play: A Developing Story](#)
- [Message in a Backpack™ Things Every Parent Should Know about Play](#)
- [Make the Most of Playtime](#) article for parents and caregivers

Get **Set** to support playful learning by examining helpful tools

To create a playful learning environment, adults must first understand developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood (NAEYC, 2020). The following tools are available to help educators and families build their knowledge of the developmental continuum.

The Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Plan (VKRP) is a tool used to understand children's skills related to early literacy, early math, and social-emotional development. This tool can help educators plan joyful and appropriately challenging learning experiences. Mrs. Diana Prudencio, an inclusive Pre-Kindergarten teacher in Manassas City, integrates early literacy into everyday activities simply by encouraging children to observe their surroundings and describe what they notice. On a recent walk, her students began to point out letters, numbers, and colors on license plates and signs in the school parking lot. Mrs. Prudencio saw the opportunity to work on alphabet knowledge and phonemic awareness: "P-p-parking! Hear the /p/ sound?"

- [Integrating Mathematics, Language, & Literacy \(VKRP\)](#)

Virginia's Early Learning and Development Standards, Birth-Five Learning Guidelines (ELDS) show how curiosity, creativity, executive function, cognitive self-regulation, and

behavioral self-regulation develop in tandem and can help guide learning activities (Virginia Board of Education, 2021). This tool can also be used by professionals and families alike to help understand appropriate next steps for young children.

- [Virginia's Early Learning and Development Standards \(ELDS\), Birth-Five Learning Guidelines](#)

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which is used in all publicly funded early childhood classrooms as a part of the Unified Virginia Quality Birth to Five System (VQB5), reinforces instruction is most successful when embedded in playful activities. CLASS shows that instruction can be integrated across all parts of the daily schedule, from playing with blocks to preparing a snack or reading a book.

- [Concept Development: Focus on Analysis and Reasoning](#)

Go Nurture playful learning in your environment

“Children’s work is their play, and everybody’s work looks different. Play allows me to be more inclusive” says Mrs. Ludwig. She and Mrs. Prudencio embed materials and activities into their classroom structures that encourage children with and without disabilities to pursue their own interests. Mrs. Prudencio arranges the furniture carefully to allow for all children, including those with walkers, to move from center to center. Mrs. Ludwig ensures that materials are labeled and introduced thoughtfully so that children can access them independently and as needed. Teachers deliberately include time for playful learning across the continuum. This provides ample opportunities for children to be active participants in the classroom and make meaning from their surroundings.

Use the following examples of playful learning to inspire the ways you provide play opportunities for children and encourage them to play independently in the classroom:

- Video: [Integrating Play Into Literacy Instruction: Strategies For Your Classroom \(REL Midwest\)](#)
- From the ECE Resource Hub: [Phonological Awareness](#)
 - Scroll to watch *Encourage Children to Rhyme* video
 - Encourage phonological awareness by singing [Willoughby Wallaby Woo](#)
- From the ECE Resource Hub: [Math](#)
 - Scroll to watch [Consider Weight](#)

These resources can inspire independent and guided play opportunities between children and caregivers at home:

- [Message in a Backpack™ Fun, Easy Ways to Play with Math at Home](#)
- Video series: [It’s Time for Play!](#)
- Let’s Play: [A Playbook for Kids of All Abilities](#)

References

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