

Shaping Ideas into Good Play

Play is essential to young children in learning and making sense of their world. It connects and establishes all areas of development for young children. Play, for children, is the primary basis for understanding. As adults caring for children, how do we shape good play?

Where do we start?

Play comes from imagination of inward ideas being expressed outward. It is the “inward,” therefore, that we must tap into to create magical, enriching play schemes that invite and welcome children to play. With young children this is exciting because their “inward” or real world is very close to their fantasy world.

Look at concepts relative to the child’s real world to develop play ideas: family members, pets, animals, community members (firefighters, police officers, construction workers, athletes), favorite story characters, favorite toys, materials (paint, cars), and concepts (insects, colors).

Prepare and research

Magic will happen in play, but it will more likely happen for those who have planned and researched. This doesn’t mean planning an elaborate play activity, but rather finding valuable information to support play. Environments themselves will be a guide to play. It is beneficial to prepare environments that spark imagination, creativity, problem solving, and self expression. Provide safe space, both inside and out, with interesting materials for children of differing abilities.

Developmental Ability

Consider the developmental ability (cognitive, physical, emotional, social, and overall background) of each child.

- What developmental milestones are they working on?
- What is hard for them? What is easy?
- What is their overall temperament?

By reviewing development and stages, we can consider the skills children need to actually do the play we are planning.

Play memories

Unlocking our own memories of play helps connect us to play with the children. List some of your favorite and most enjoyable play times. Where were they? Why was it fun? What materials did you use? Did you play alone or with others? Another way to gain perception on play is to actually play! When the children are not there, try sitting down and playing with the materials and see what ideas surface.

Theorists in early education have labeled stages and development of play:

Solitary Play – Child plays alone/independently; one of the earliest stages of play

Onlooker Play – Child observes play around him, may ask questions, but doesn’t enter the play

Parallel Play – Children play side-by-side or even use the same material but do not interact or collaborate

Associative Play – Children play together loosely in an unorganized way; they may share material but do not make connections or work together

Cooperative Play – Children work together, collaborating and exchanging ideas and materials

Stage the play

Walk through your door into the space where you will be caring for children and see if you can choose at least four areas where play can easily begin. Try staging the area by strategically placing materials to entice play:

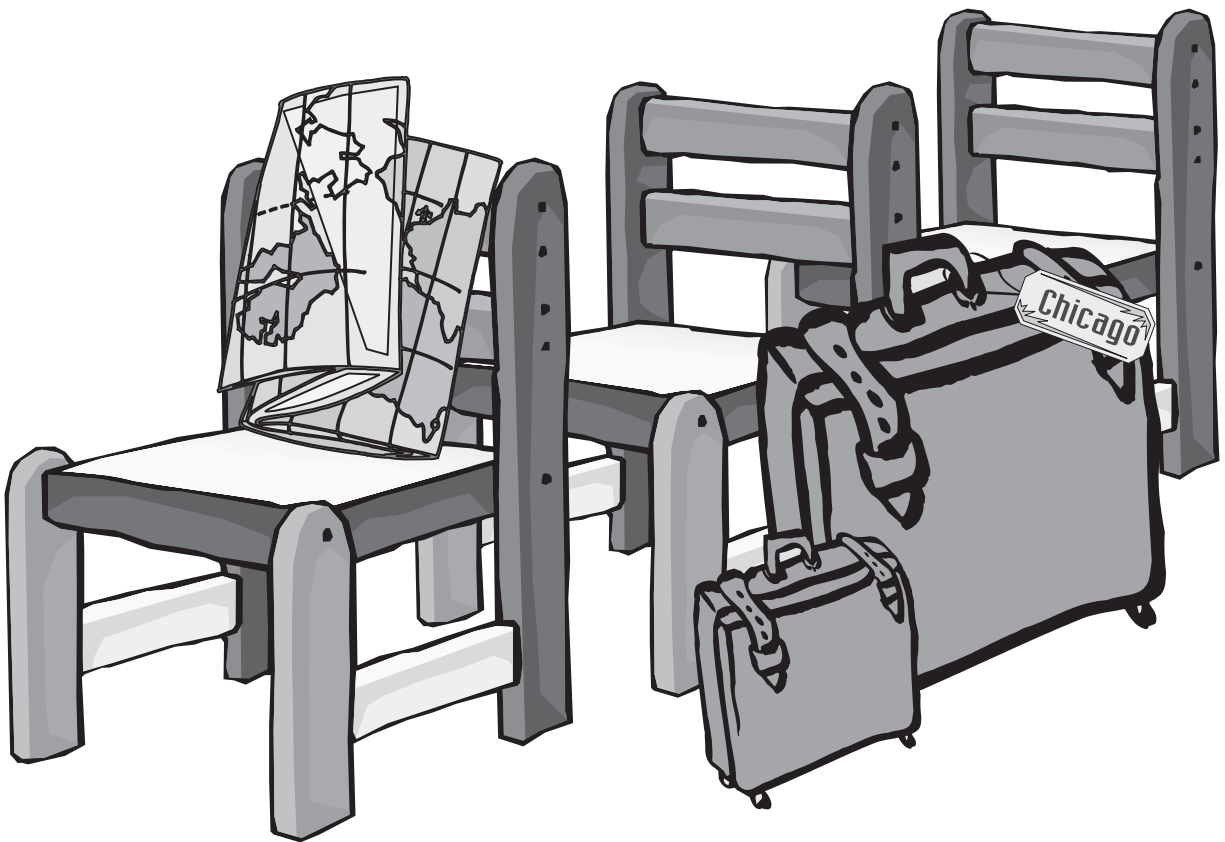
- Line up chairs with small bags, purses, and suitcases, and you have an instant bus or airplane
- Expand the sand table (or sandbox) with cars, trucks, rocks, sticks, and small figurines of people (and a little water, if you are adventurous) and you have an instant construction site
- Place an open basket of rolled-up fabric remnants or small blankets on the floor
- Start a line of blocks going from one area to another in the room

Try staging the area by strategically placing materials to entice play:

May I come in?

Our role in play is important, but it doesn't mean we are constantly "in" the play. At times, children may want our physical presence for reassurance, but really do not want our interaction. Look for cues from the children as to how involved you become.

Shaping good play is an ongoing path for those of us caring for children. Play is a natural path for children, but can be thoroughly enriched by thoughtful, attentive adults. When we follow the lead of the children and incorporate our knowledge in child development, we are rewarded with witnessing and experiencing how wonderful play can be—and how much fun!



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