

3. Children need ample time and space to engage in free play every day.

What We Believe

Play is the foundation for whole-child optimal development. DEY National Advisor Suzanne Axelsson reminds us that “Play is life. It is our primary way of development and understanding the world, and mental health. We never stop playing, but how we play changes”. Play is not a break from learning or a reward for learning, play is learning and development.

Why This is Important

Children are wired to explore, experiment, and understand their world through play. It’s how they make sense of experiences, try out ideas, and develop cognitive skills. Unlike formal instruction, play is self-directed and deeply engaging. Through play, children develop cognitive skills (i.e., problem-solving, memory, creativity, and decision-making); social skills (i.e., cooperation, negotiation, empathy, and conflict resolution); emotional skills (i.e, self-regulation, confidence, and resilience); and physical skills (i.e., fine and gross motor development). Children are not mini-adults. Play aligns with their developmental stage, meeting them where they are rather than imposing formal structures they may not be ready for.

| ✓ What it looks like when we get it right. | ✗ What it feels like when we get it wrong. |
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| Children have the time and space to play freely with a variety of materials. Children are engaged, confident, and collaborating. They explore at their own pace and feel valued. | The day is rigidly scheduled with mostly desk work, worksheets, and direct instruction. Play is limited to brief recess or seen as a reward. Children feel restless, frustrated, or bored. |
| Social and emotional skills develop authentically through play. Children develop empathy, communication, and conflict-resolution skills in a safe, meaningful way. They feel supported and emotionally secure. | Children are forced to participate in scripted teacher-led social and emotional lessons and denied time to play. They miss opportunities to build social skills, and the environment feels less emotionally safe. |
| Children build the foundation for pre-literacy and numeracy skills through child-directed play. Children gain confidence and see themselves as capable learners which fosters a stable foundation for future academic learning. | Direct instruction is believed to be the only way to teach academic skills. Children are expected to learn through rote drills, memorization, and worksheets. Children may disengage or develop anxiety around learning. Natural curiosity and love for learning are eroded. |