



MAINE DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION

Understanding the Role of Play in Pre-K through Grade 2 Classrooms: Assessing Growth & Development Through Playful Learning

Presented by: The Early Learning Team



Our Team Today

Presenter Information



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Audience Introductions

Classroom Teachers

Principals

Curriculum Directors

Special Education Teachers

Support Staff

Other?

Learning Objectives/Session Overview



Today's learning objectives and session goals

Moving from the *WHY* and *HOW* of play-based learning to practical, play-based assessment strategies to observe, document, and interpret student growth and development:

- Explain the value of play-based assessment in supporting whole-child development.
- Identify observable indicators of growth across key developmental domains during play.
- Interpret play-based observations to identify strengths, patterns, and next instructional steps.
- Develop an action step to embed manageable, ongoing assessment practices into daily routines.

**Session 1 & 2
overview:**

**The “Why” and
“How” of
Play-Based
Learning**

**Play is the vehicle for
learning, not an add-on**



Can *PLAY* be Defined in More Than One Way?

Free Play

“Free play is uninhibited, unfettered play time. It happens alone or with peers. It’s **exploring, discovering, and imagining** at will.”



Guided Play

Guided play is “free play with gentle, unobtrusive guidance from an adult or another child who **steers the play** but not the outcome.”



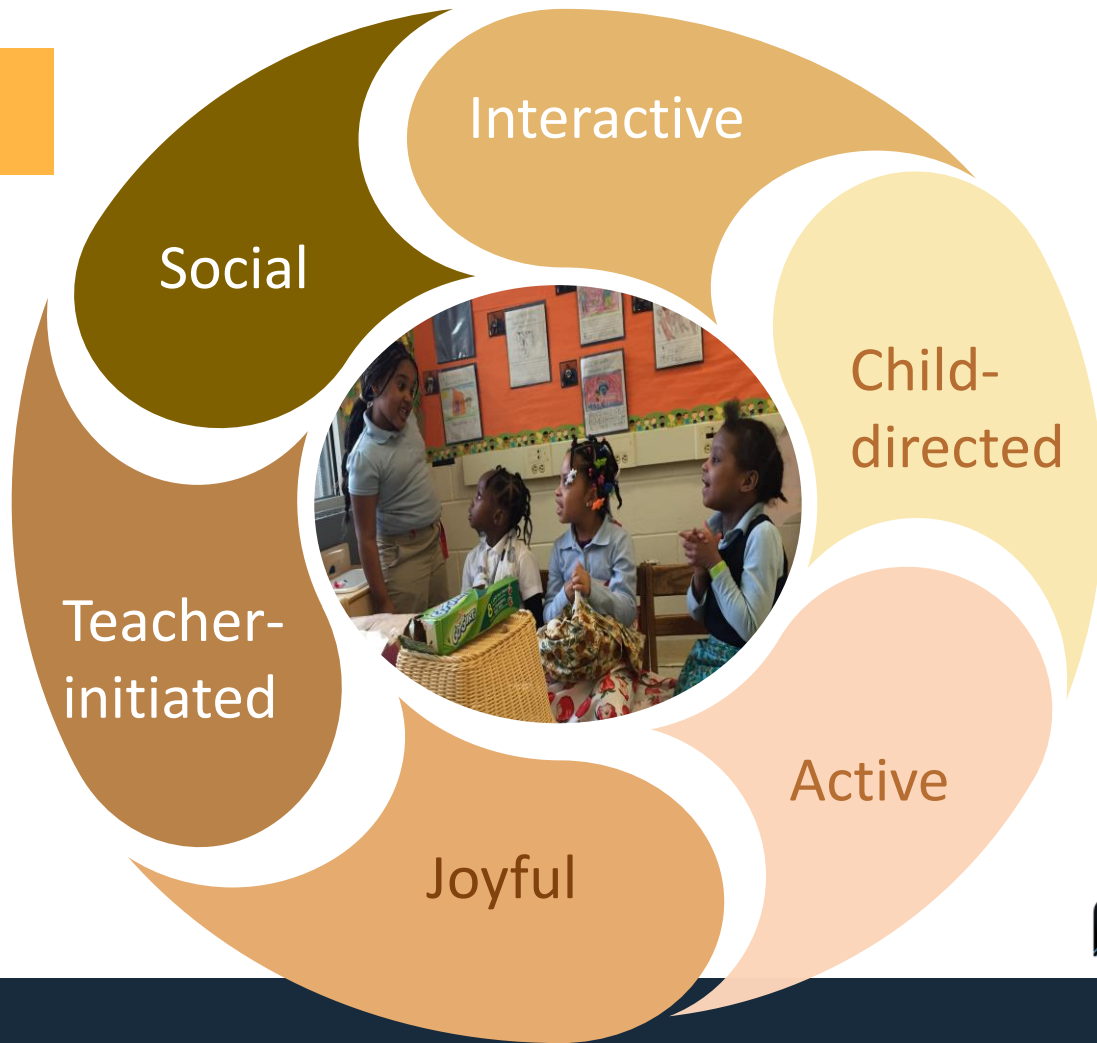
Teacher Directed Play

Teacher directed play is “a **prescribed activity** with a set outcome, directed by an adult or other authority (such as game rules).”



Connell, G. McCarthy C. (2014) *A Moving Child Is a Learning Child.*

Guided Play is...



What Do We Mean by “Playful Strategies”?



Students have access to:

- Child-initiated and teacher-guided play and interaction
- Open-ended materials and exploration
- Real-world problem solving that happens in real time and is transferrable
- Social interaction and imagination

Role of the adult

- ❖ Ask students open-ended questions about what they are working on.
- ❖ Highlight and embed literacy opportunities.
- ❖ Model and facilitate.
- ❖ Balance adult and child talk.
- ❖ Observe and document students's actions and conversation. Share these with teaching partners.
- ❖ Provide support when students ask for help, while allowing them to grapple with problems on their own and with each other.
- ❖ Highlight important vocabulary words, especially those connected to the content.



Assessment Word Cloud



Click to download as image

What terms come to mind when you think about assessment in the early elementary grades?

Brainstorm a list of 3-5 terms.

<https://www.menti.com/al33yvv8dogs>

Formative vs. Summative Assessment

Formative Assessment

- ✓ Ongoing and continuous
- ✓ Happens during learning
- ✓ Guides instruction and next steps
- ✓ Informal and observational

Examples: observing play, anecdotal notes, photos, conversations with children

Summative Assessment

- Occurs at a specific point in time
- Happens after learning
- Measures what has been learned
- Often more formal

Examples: end-of-unit assessments, developmental checklists, progress reports

Play-based observation provides powerful formative assessment data that helps educators respond to children's learning in real time.

Why Assess Through Play?

- Play reveals authentic learning
- Supports whole-child development
- Aligns with developmentally appropriate practice (DAP)
- Reduces pressure on children and educators
- Offers authentic opportunities for students to transfer learning
- Genuine opportunities to document learning across disciplines



What Assessment Looks Like in Play

- ✓ Objective observation over interpretation
- ✓ Listening to children's language
- ✓ Noticing strategies, persistence, and collaboration
- ✓ Capturing learning in the moment



PRESCHOOL
MELDS
Maine's Early Learning and Development Standards
MELDS

Domains of Growth & Development

Maine Early Learning and Development Standards (MELDS)

- Social–Emotional Development
- Early Language & Literacy
- Cognitive Development
- Physical Development & Health
- Approaches to Learning and Play

Maine's Learning Results (MLRs)

- English Language Arts
- Life and Career Ready
- Physical Education
- Visual and Performing Arts
- World Languages
- Health Education
- Mathematics
- Science and Engineering
- Social Studies



Maine Department of Education

2024

Maine Department of Health & Human Services



a. Counts

Not Yet	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
	<p>Verbally counts (not always in the correct order)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Says, "One, two, ten," as she pretends to count 	<p>Verbally counts to 10; counts up to five objects accurately, using one number name for each object</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counts to 10 when playing "Hide and Seek" Counts out four scissors and puts them at the table 	<p>Verbally counts to 20; counts 10–20 objects accurately; knows the last number states how many in all; tells what number (1–10) comes next in order by counting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counts to 20 while walking across room Counts 10 plastic worms and says, "I have 10 worms." When asked, "What comes after six?" says, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven...seven." 	<p>Uses number names while counting to 100 by 1s and 10s; counts 30 objects accurately; tells what number comes before and after a specified number up to 20</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counts 28 steps to the cafeteria When asked what comes after 15, says, "Sixteen. That's one larger, and 17 is one larger than 16." When asked what comes after 16, says, "Seventeen" without beginning at one 	<p>Counts to 120 to determine how many; uses skip counting by 2s, 5s, and 10s; begins counting forward at any number between 1 and 120; counts backward from 20</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Says, "I can count to 50 really fast: 10, 20, 30, 40, 50!" Accurately counts from 115 to 120 beginning at 115 when asked to do so 	<p>Counts to 1,000 to determine how many; uses skip counting (2s, 5s, 10s, and 100s); begins counting at any number between 1 and 1,000; switches between skip counts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counts to 1,000 by 100s: "100, 200, 300...700, 800, 900, 1,000!" When asked to count to 200, begins counting by 2s but then changes to counting by 10s when she realizes it is taking too long 	<p>Counts to more than 1,000 using number word patterns (e.g., tens, teens) and skip counting; uses skip counting by 2s, 4s, 5s, 6s, 10s, and 100s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begins counting, "999, 1,000, 1,110, 1,120, 1,130...1,180, 1,190, 2,000" Groups objects into sets of four and then counts them: "Four, eight, twelve, sixteen, twenty, twenty-four, twenty-eight, thirty-two...." 								

V. *Mathematics*

S. Number and counting

- 25. **Exploring more:** Children experience “more.”
- 26. **One-to-one correspondence:** Children experience one-to-one correspondence.
- 27. **Number:** Children experience the number of things.

- 31. **Number words and symbols:** Children recognize and use number words and symbols.
- 32. **Counting:** Children count things.
- 33. **Part-whole relationships:** Children combine and separate quantities of objects.



Observation as a Core Tool

What to watch for during play

Focusing on behaviors, not products

Using objective language

What to Watch for During Play

Initiation and persistence: Who starts play ideas? Who sticks with a challenge versus abandoning it?

Social negotiation: How children enter play, respond to peers, resolve conflict, or adapt roles.

Problem-solving strategies: Trial-and-error, asking for help, using materials in flexible ways.

Emotional regulation: Signs of frustration, joy, pride, or recovery after difficulty.

Language use: Self-talk, peer talk, storytelling, and vocabulary connected to play themes.

Body engagement: Gross- and fine-motor coordination, balance, strength, and spatial awareness.

Engagement over time: Length and depth of play, not just excitement or noise level.

Inclusion and access: Who is participating, who is observing, and who may be unintentionally excluded.

We're watching the child, not managing the activity.

Focusing on Behaviors, Not Products

Process over outcome: Value the thinking, effort, and strategies rather than the finished structure or artwork.

Multiple right answers: Recognize that different approaches can demonstrate the same skill.

Growth evidence: Look for changes in approach, stamina, collaboration, or flexibility over time.

Avoid comparison: Children's play does not need to look the same to be equally meaningful.

Mess as data: Disorganization, experimentation, and mistakes often signal deep learning.

Invisible learning: Planning, imagining, negotiating, and reflecting may not leave a physical product.

The learning lives in what the child *does*, not what they *make*.

Using Objective Language

Describe, don't interpret: State what you see and hear before assigning meaning.

Instead of: *"She was frustrated"*

Say: *"She clenched her fists, raised her voice, and stopped building."*

Separate observation from inference: Make room for multiple explanations.

Neutral tone: Avoid judgment-laden words like *good, bad, lazy, advanced, disruptive*.

Specific and concrete: Use times, actions, and materials to anchor observations.

Supports collaboration: Objective language allows teams to analyze patterns together.

Reduces bias: Helps ensure expectations and decisions are based on evidence, not assumptions.

Objective language gives us shared clarity and protects equity.



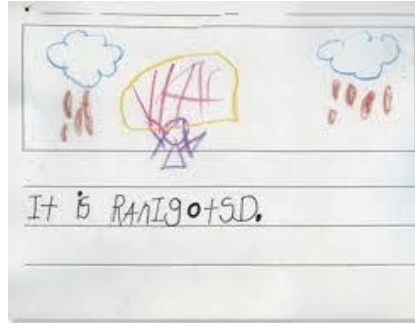
Let's Take A Break

Documentation Methods

Anecdotal notes



Work samples and artifacts



Photos and short videos



Learning stories



Checklists and developmental indicators



Observation Checklist Worksheet

Domain/Sub-Domain	Numeracy/Counting & Cardinality	Skill or behavior encouraged:	Counting by ones			
Date:		Time:				
Setting:	Block Center					
Description of activity:	Students have been challenged to construct towers using as many blocks (or Legos) as possible. <u>Teacher invites</u> students to share their towers and to count the number of blocks in their towers.					
Progression of observable skills	Children's Names or Initials					
Verbally counts but not in order						
Counts to 10 by ones						
Counts to 20						
Counts beyond 20						

Observation Checklist Worksheet

Domain/Sub-Domain	Literacy/Writing	Skill or behavior encouraged:	Letter and word formation			
Date:		Time:				
Setting:	Writing Center					
Description of activity:	Students are writing letters to the principal to share their ideas for new playground equipment.					
Progression of observable skills	Children's Names or Initials					
Scribbles to represent ideas; attempts drawing with meaning						
Writes some letters; labels drawings with letters or words						
Writes simple words using phonetic spelling						
Writes simple <u>sentence</u> using conventional and phonetic spelling						
Writes several sentences using conventional and phonetic spelling						



Making Documentation Manageable



- Small, consistent moments
- One focus area at a time
- One child or a small group of children at a time
- Share the responsibility
- Digital vs. paper tools- what do you prefer?
- Look for growth over time
- Identify strengths and next steps
- Avoid deficit-based thinking
- Ask yourself: “What is this child telling me?”



Video option 1 (6 minutes)

Block bldg. towers

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nI_XbHFf6Sfw&list=PLG5a7din-gklBqwxqfaq1r4mMet2Hx4Tz&index=5



Video option 2 (4.5 minutes)

Dramatic play with an adult

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejD-j2lOx30&list=PLG5a7din-gklBqwxqfaq1r4mMet2Hx4Tz&index=9>



Video option 3 (3 minutes)

Discovery Table

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdZjIWnxhg0&list=PLG5a7din-gklBqwxqfaq1r4mMet2Hx4Tz&index=3>

- 1. Pick a video link and watch at least 3 minutes of the video**
- 2. Observe the children at play and document what they're doing**
 - ✓ **What areas of development did you observe/assess?**
 - ✓ **Where are their opportunities for interaction and conversation among peers and/or adults?**
 - ✓ **How might this documentation inform your instruction?**
- 3. Be prepared to share out**

Thinking and Feedback (at least 1x/week, 8-15 min)

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- students develop critical thinking skills such as reflection, flexibility, perspective-taking, and problem solving.
- students practice self-regulation.
- students use complex language and precise vocabulary to reflect on and describe their work.
- In discussing ongoing work, students respect multiple viewpoints, give and receive constructive feedback, and support each other to consider new ideas.
- students are challenged, inspired, and supported to try out new processes and materials and to create work that clearly communicates their ideas to an audience.



Thinking and Feedback



Looking



Noticing



Listening



Wondering



Suggesting
and
Inspiring





Use Assessment to Inform Instruction

*What can the child do **successfully** and **independently** and what skill is expected next?*

Plan responsive play invitations

Based on the next skill to master, what playful opportunities could be made available for practice?

Adjust environments and materials

How can your classroom furniture and materials support that child's growth?

Support individual and group needs

What skills can be taught and practiced to multiple groups of children through play?

Partner and consult with specialists when needed!

Remember...

- Honor cultural and linguistic differences
- Consider multiple ways to demonstrate learning
- Avoid bias in observation
- Partner with families
 - Share learning through stories and visuals
 - Translate observations into family-friendly language
 - Celebrate growth and joy in learning
 - Share strength-based reports



This is hard!

Common Challenges & Solutions

- **“I don’t have time”**
=embed observation into play and already existing routines
- **“It feels overwhelming”**
=take your time and stay organized
- **“It’s hard to track growth”**
=revisit documentation regularly and keep your documentation organized by date



**One strategy to try
this week.**

**One question you're
still wondering
about.**

**How will this shift
your assessment
practice?**

Session Feedback





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