



## CENTER TO CLOSE THE OPPORTUNITY GAP

Identifying Best Practices to Ensure Student  
Achievement in California's K-12 Schools

**CSU** The California State University

# Play in ECE

## Target Audience

- PK-12 Teachers & Student Support Personnel
- Higher Education Faculty
- Coaches/Teacher Support Personnel
- Families and Community Partners

## Grade Levels

- Early Childhood
- Elementary
- High School
- N/A

## Topic Areas

- Assessment
- Behavior Supports/Social Emotional Learning
- Foster/Homeless Youth
- History/Social Science
- In-service Educator Preparation
- Math
- Multi-lingual Learners
- Policy
- Pre-service Educator Preparation
- Reading/Language Arts
- Science
- Special Education
- Student Supports

## Description

Play in ECE is a compilation of vetted resources for caregivers, teachers, and future early childhood educators to understand why children play, and how to ensure play is at the center of learning beginning in preschool. Ignoring the evidence is to the detriment of children and exacerbates the opportunity gap. The resource is based on a conceptual framework for play to illustrate how play is a singular ingredient for optimal development.

1. Play is integral to the development in early childhood (Yogman, 2018).
2. Characteristics of play include joy, meaning, iteration, social interaction, and active engagement (Fynn, 2020; Zosh et al., 2017)
3. Teaching and learning scenarios that are characteristic of play create a balance of child and teacher control and are essential for fostering positive relationships (Zosh et al., 2017).

4. Play and positive relationships buffer toxic stress that threatens neurological development and learning trajectories over a lifetime (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2020).

The resource has a section organized by subject area so users can easily align the CA standards to the resource content and descriptions of how children learn across content areas. The resource includes a teacher reflection tool to measure characteristics of play and teaching scenarios in the classroom.

## Opportunity

Efforts to close the achievement gap twenty years ago resulted in a shift in kindergarten to a teach-to-the-test approach, impacting the children the policy intended to help. Since then, the problem has permeated into preschool. The problem becomes a crisis for at-risk children. The opportunity gap exists because at-risk youth statistically have fewer safe spaces and places to play outside of school and are more likely to encounter toxic stress. Removing barriers to play is an opportunity to promote developmentally appropriate pedagogy that is inclusive, equitable, and accessible to all children.

The benefit of play to students ages 0-8 is that it provides a context for optimal teaching scenarios, learning environments, and developmental trajectories. Experts in education and science concur that play in early childhood is a singular ingredient for optimal development and is how children access the cognitive, social-emotional, and gross and fine motor skills needed for a lifetime of learning. Play also lays the groundwork for caring adults to build positive relationships with young children and softens the blow of toxic stress on the developing brain.

## Recommended Citation

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<https://ccog.calstate.edu/clearinghouse/play-ece>

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