



## Introduction to the Play K Curriculum Design



*"Play is a child's work."*

This quote, attributed to Maria Montessori, is well known in the early childhood community. Many early learning experts have emphasized the importance of play to child development, including Jean Piaget, Friedrich Froebel and Fred Rogers, to name a few. More recently, experts in the library world have reminded us not only of the power of play, but the many ways in which the public library can promote play in their own settings and in their outreach efforts (Stoltz, D., Conner, M. and Bradberry, J., 2015).

Play is one of the five practices promoted in *Every Child Ready to Read @ your library, second edition (ECRR 2)*. Their workshops promote the understanding that play is one of the best ways for children to learn language and literacy skills. One of the key understandings of ECRR2 is that play helps children think symbolically; a ruler becomes a magic wand, today becomes a time when dinosaurs were alive, or a playmate becomes an astronaut exploring space. Through play, children realize that one thing can stand for another. This also helps children understand that written words stand for real objects and experiences.

In her book, *Creating a Beautiful Mess: Ten Essential Play Experiences For a Joyous Childhood*, Ann Gadzikowski reminds us that simple activities, such as telling a story with toys or playing a turn-taking game, encourage language development, imagination, and social interaction. She proposes that a little mess is a small price to pay for learning experiences that are fun and promote social-emotional growth at the same time. In her recent American Libraries article, *A Place for Play*, Abby Johnson reminds us that playtime in the library gives librarians a chance to model play techniques for children and parents. In addition, having play spaces and toys makes the library a fun destination where adult-child interaction is encouraged. The Play-K curriculum and materials were designed to make this easier for Pennsylvania's libraries to achieve, no matter what an individual library's staff or budget may be.

The Play K curriculum consists of materials and activities for six different *playscapes*, or "play and learn centers." Each playscape is designed around an early childhood theme, or topic, to explore. A big idea (central understanding), together with one or more essential questions, provide focus for the learning experiences. Programming options are provided for each playscape to support a range of implementation based upon library staffing and community needs. The Play K curriculum supports the Cruise into

Kindergarten initiative and Pennsylvania's Learning Standards for Early Childhood with the goal of promoting school readiness within the library setting.

### **Overview**

Within each playscape, the nine key learning areas from Pennsylvania's Learning Standards for Early Childhood are reinforced as children and parents play together and participate in the activities. Materials and books (fiction and informational text) for hands-on learning are provided, along with technology connections that support the theme. Three programming options are provided for each playscape: a Passive Program, a Circle Time Program, and Storytime Program ideas for extending the playscape theme.

The Passive Program option consists of displaying the playscape materials and books to create a “play and learn center” in an available space. A tip card (1, 2, 3, Play with Me!) is included in each playscape with suggestions for parents on how to interact with their children and the materials.

In the Circle Time option, a librarian leads the activities. Social skills needed for kindergarten are reinforced and practiced in a fun, age appropriate way. Children are introduced to calendar skills, turn-taking, and new vocabulary as they participate in a variety of learning experiences. The playscape materials are previewed in the Circle Time and interactive learning is modeled for the parents who attend.

Within the Storytime Program option, extension activities and resources are provided to support early literacy development with the five practices of ECRR2: talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing.

### **Playscape 1: All Aboard!**

This playscape explores the theme of transportation with preschoolers. The big idea for the theme is: Transportation, in its many forms, is important to our daily lives. Two essential questions guide the programming options: How do we get from place to place? What ways of transportation help us travel on land, water, and in the sky?

Children and parents have the opportunity to explore transportation puzzles, sort and play with a variety of toy vehicles, play a collection of transportation themed file folder games, and read fiction and informational books together. Fine motor skills, sorting and categorization concepts, problem-solving skills, phonological awareness, content area vocabulary and background knowledge are strengthened as parents and children play and learn together.

### **Playscape 2: A Home For Me and a Home For You**

This playscape explores the theme of house and home with preschoolers. The big idea for the theme is: Many different types of houses can be homes for people. Two essential questions guide the programming options: How can I describe my house? What are other types of houses that are homes for people?

Children and parents have the opportunity to play with storytelling puppets and a flannel board re-telling set, build with a Blocks & Blueprints Learning Center, play a rhyming sounds game with picture cards and sorting houses, and read fictional and informational books together. Narrative skills and comprehension, imagination, spatial and problem-solving skills, phonological awareness, content area vocabulary and background knowledge are strengthened as parents and children play and learn together.

### **Playscape 3: Let's Go Shopping!**

This playscape explores the theme of shopping and beginning economics with preschoolers. The big idea for this theme is: Money is used to purchase goods and services. When we go shopping, we make choices about what to buy with our money. Two essential questions guide the programming options: Why is a grocery store important in a community? How do we buy things in the grocery store?

Children and parents have the opportunity to “play store” with a toy cash register and toy food. A “Get Ready to Write Gumball Grab Game” provides fine motor skill development. Both fiction and informational text for shared reading round out this playscape. Narrative skills, problem-solving skills, concepts about print, content area vocabulary and background knowledge are strengthened as parents and children play and learn together.

### **Playscape 4: All Around Town**

This playscape explores the theme of community and citizenship with preschoolers. The big idea for this theme is: When people work together and help one another, our community is a better place. Two essential questions guide the programming options: Who are the helpers in my community? How can I be a good community member?

Children and parents have the opportunity to set up and map a pretend community while playing with a “Map My Town Learning Center,” community block play people, and a set of vehicles for community helpers. Fiction and informational text for shared reading allow parents and children to further explore the theme together. Narrative skills, imagination, sorting and categorizing, content area vocabulary and background knowledge are strengthened as parents and children play and learn together.

### **Playscape 5: Amazing Animals - Pets**

This playscape explores the theme of animals as pets with preschoolers. The big idea for this theme is: Animals are living things that need food, water and air to live and grow. Two essential questions guide the programming options: Which animals make good pets? What do pets need to live and grow?

Children and parents have the opportunity to explore and play at being an animal doctor with a “pet vet center.” A feed the bunny game and a set of pet puzzles round out this playscape. Fiction and informational text for shared reading allow parents and children to further explore the animal world together. Narrative skills, imagination, fine motor skills, content area vocabulary and background knowledge are strengthened as parents and children play and learn together.

## Playscape 6: My Colorful World

This playscape explores the theme of color and light with preschoolers. The big idea for this theme is: Physical properties help us understand and describe the world around us. Two essential questions guide the programming options: How do colors help us describe objects in our world? How can we sort and observe objects?

Children and parents have the opportunity to play with storytelling puppets, build with light and color table top blocks, play with size and color teddy bear counters and hands-on sorting and patterning trays, and explore science concepts with a color and light discovery kit. Fiction and informational text for shared reading allow parents and children to further explore color and light together. Narrative skills and comprehension, imagination, spatial and problem-solving skills, color recognition and sorting, content area vocabulary and background knowledge are strengthened as parents and children play and learn together.

### References:

Stoltz, Dorothy, Conner, Marisa, and James Bradberry. *The Power of Play: Designing Early Learning Spaces*. Chicago: ALA Editions, 2015.

Every Child Ready to Read® is a project of the Association for Library Service to Children and the Public Library Association, divisions of the American Library Association. [www.everychildreadytoread.org](http://www.everychildreadytoread.org)

Gadzikowski, Ann. *Creating a Beautiful Mess: Ten Essential Play Experiences for a Joyous Childhood*. St. Paul: Redleaf Press, 2015.

Johnson, Abby. "A Place for Play." *American Libraries Magazine*, September 10, 2015, <http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2015/09/10/place-for-play/>