





# Playful Learning in Early Childhood

By Rachel A. Gordon

The pressure for accountability in education extends down into early childhood. Increasingly policymakers, practitioners and parents hope that enriched early childhood experiences will better prepare children for school. Often the goal of such enriched experiences is to close gaps in school readiness between more- and less-advantaged children. Some middle- and upper-middle income parents also seek out such experiences, believing that doing so will put their child a step ahead when it is time to begin school.

Evidence supports some early interventions, as I discuss below. However, critics challenge some extreme outcomes of these efforts, such as pushing school-like schedules and activities into preschool. Developmental scientists and early childhood professionals argue that these approaches run counter to the way in which young children learn.

Why have we seen these trends? Why are there strong feelings on either side of the debate about how children learn best? This chapter examines how early childhood education policies in Illinois and other states contribute to that debate, and highlights some promising directions for future policy.

## What is Playful Learning

Playful learning, as the term suggests, is learning that occurs during play. It contrasts with rote learning, which focuses on repetition and memorization, and even with other didactic learning approaches in which the teacher highly structures and tightly directs activities. The playful learning approach recognizes that there is a false dichotomy between play and learning: “to the child, the two activities are one and the same.”<sup>1</sup> Playful learning also distinguishes



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free play from guided play. Free play occurs without teacher structure or input. In guided play, the teacher arranges materials and activities in the room to foster child-initiated discovery and watches for opportunities to interact with children during naturally occurring “teachable moments,” when the child is poised to learn new concepts. Children benefit from both kinds of play, but it is guided play that best fosters learning.<sup>2</sup>

The playful learning approach rests on decades of developmental research in which scientists have documented the ways in which infants, toddlers, and preschoolers engage their environment at the cusp of their developmental understanding. Most of us have likely observed children do this as they experiment with new concepts. For example, as a three-year-old develops the concept of “one to one correspondence” she might repeatedly line up toys in a row, such as a set of horses and then one rider for each of

<sup>1</sup> Hirsh-Pasek, Kathy, Golinkoff, Roberta Michnick, Berk, Laura E., & Singer, Dorothy G. (2009). *A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool: Presenting the Evidence*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, page x.

<sup>2</sup> Fisher, K., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R. M., Singer, D., & Berk, L. E. (2011). “Playing around in school: Implications for learning and educational policy.” In A. Pellegrini (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Play*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 341-363.

them.<sup>3</sup> Developmentalists such as Jean Piaget documented how the normal course of development emerges through such play, in which children use direct experience with the world to learn complex, abstract concepts. The early childhood profession and many early childhood curricula encourage such playful learning. Typically, the majority of time is spent either providing the materials and space that will allow children to engage in such unstructured free play as well as offering guided play opportunities in which teachers “scaffold” learning by gently guiding children at the edge of their developmental understanding.

For example, the two interventions that have been widely touted in support of public investments in early childhood education—the Perry Preschool Program and Abecedarian Project—both used such approaches. For the Abecedarian project, a series of LearningGames® were created that helped teachers engage in playful learning.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, parents also learned the games. For example, the “What would happen if?” game helps children think about logical order. A teacher might ask “What would happen if you put on your shoes before your socks?” The “Double Treasure” game helps children classify in more complex ways by asking them to find things that all have two characteristics (e.g., round and a container). LearningGames®, alone or in combination with additional intervention components, has been associated with immediate benefits of improved cognitive and social development and long-term benefits such as reduced chances of dropping out of school or of pregnancy during adolescence. LearningGames® is presently used as part of the Creative Curriculum for family day care homes, a broader curricular approach that features child-initiated and teacher-guided learning.

Similarly, the Perry Preschool Study used the HighScope® curriculum, which emphasized children choosing their own activities

with staff guidance and support.<sup>5</sup> The intervention was associated with numerous short- and long-term outcomes, including higher cognitive scores in kindergarten and higher earnings and lower arrest rates by middle age. The HighScope® Curriculum has also been evaluated in comparison to other curricula, including a model of direct instruction (in which teachers focused on academics and rote learning). Children in all groups had immediate boosts in cognitive outcomes, but a follow-up found that young adults who had received the HighScope® Curriculum as preschoolers (and in many cases another child-directed curriculum) showed greater social responsibility than young adults who had received the direct instruction curriculum, including fewer arrest rates.

### Challenges to Playful Learning

The LearningGames® and HighScope® curricula reflect the practice model endorsed by the early childhood profession. This approach has been challenged, however, as policymakers and the public increasingly look to close school readiness gaps by investing in early childhood education.

Since the 1980s, there has been a substantial movement toward providing “universal preschool” or “state pre-kindergarten”—publicly funded preschool for every family who wants to use it. Figure 1 (page 86) shows the trend in enrollment of three- and four-year-olds in state funded pre-kindergarten between 2002 and 2010 nationally and in Illinois. Nationally, the percentage of four-year-olds enrolled nearly doubled, from 14 percent to 27 percent. Illinois exceeds the national average (with 31 percent of four-year-olds currently enrolled), and has been particularly successful in reaching three-year-olds, whose enrollments increased from 8 percent to 19 percent (compared with just 4 percent nationally). Demand for non-parental child care has also increased as more children reside in single-parent, single-earner or dual-earner families. The

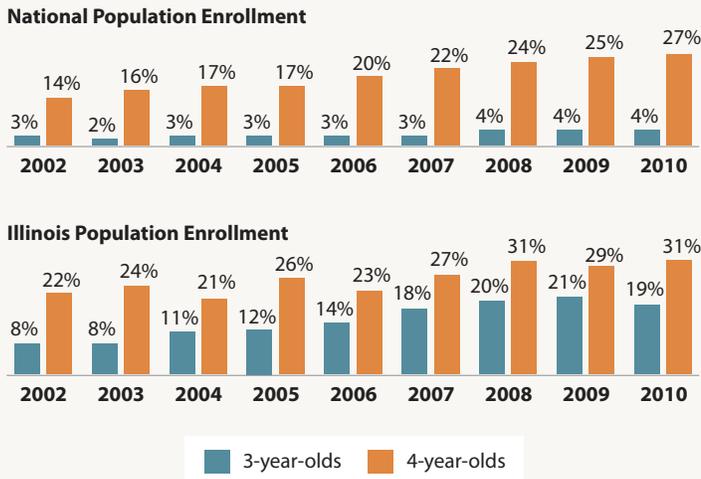


<sup>3</sup> Hirsh-Pasek, Kathy, & Golinkoff, Roberta Michnick. (2003). *Einstein Never Used Flash Cards*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.teachingstrategies.com/page/LearningGames.cfm>.

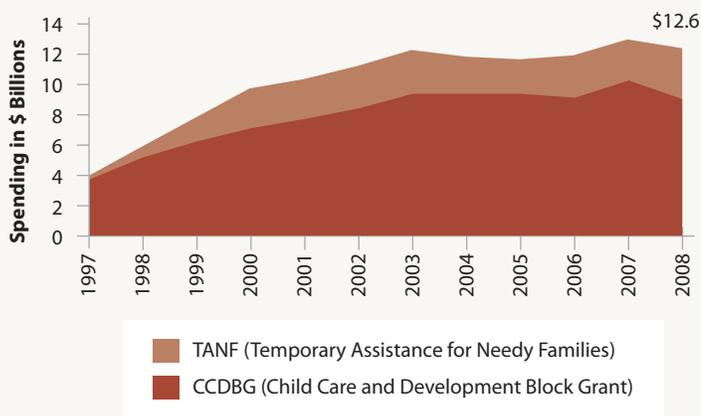
<sup>5</sup> <http://www.highscope.org/content.asp?contentid=219>.

Figure 1  
**Percent of National and Illinois Population Enrolled in State Funded Pre-Kindergarten, 2002–2010**



Source: <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf> page 4 and page 52

Figure 2  
**Total Combined Child Care Spending, 1997–2008**



Source: CLASP calculations based on HHS data, <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/Child-Care-Assist-in-2008.pdf>

welfare reform of the mid-1990s increased the movement of parents from welfare to work and associated child-care subsidies provided publicly funded attendance at center-based preschool for more children. Figure 2 shows the growth in federal expenditures on child care subsidies between 1997 and 2008, an increase from \$4 billion to nearly \$13 billion.

These investments have increased public scrutiny of what happens in preschools and child care. Parents and policymakers do not always consider the type of playful learning they observe when they visit programs to be consistent with the learning activities they expect. Preschool usually happens in school buildings, so observers may expect it to be school-like, with desks and worksheets. Even when preschool (or other organized care of four-year-olds) happens in community-based child care centers, public funding that is connected with school readiness may lead observers to look for school-like signals of teaching and learning. For instance, in his discussions with parents, researcher Bruce Fuller found that some “want preschool to look more like school, with more focus on cognitive growth and activities that resemble school *work*, not *play*. They do not feel that so much ‘free play’ and facilitated exploration will result in better grades once their youngster enters school.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the early childhood field of study became more explicit in its explanation and defense of its approach as public provision of preschool increased. The term “developmentally appropriate practice” was formally defined through a series of iterations beginning in 1987.<sup>7</sup> The term is now widely used to refer to an approach that includes a predominance of child-

<sup>6</sup> Fuller, Bruce. (2007). *Standardized Childhood: The Political and Cultural Struggle over Early Education*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Quote is from page 99 (emphasis in original).

<sup>7</sup> Copple, C. & Bredekamp, S. (Eds.). (2009). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

initiated activities selected from a wide array of options; a “whole child” approach that integrates physical, emotional, social and cognitive development; and, highly trained teachers who aid development by being responsive to children’s age-related and individual needs. Sue Bredekamp from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) wrote in a reaction to an early critique of the approach that the term has a long history but was first explicitly defined in 1987, partly in response to the increase of public schools offering pre-kindergarten programs for four-year-olds. “The trend toward push-down academic curriculum in kindergarten and the primary grades was cited by many teachers as the major barrier to implementing developmentally appropriate practice,” Bredekamp noted.<sup>8</sup>

There has been increasing policy interest in articulating what we expect children to learn in preschool through early learning standards and to document that programs funded with public dollars are of high quality. Developmentalists and early childhood professionals are concerned that accountability standards may push programs toward rote rather than playful learning. If accountability standards do have this result, then the evidence reviewed above suggests that they may ironically lead to poorer rather than better child outcomes, especially in the long run. Accountability standards that ensure playful learning happens are difficult to write, monitor and implement, however. Playful learning may also cost more than custodial child care or even “out of the box” curricula. The LearningGames® and HighScope® curricula described above and the broader developmentally appropriate practice approach require a preschool or child care classroom teacher who is knowledgeable about child development and skillful in engaging young children. Although pay for teachers in state pre-kindergarten has improved in many states, most salaries in early childhood are low. Thus, the training and educa-

tion required for such skillful teachers is out of sync with pay in the field. NAEYC also recommends limits on class size and teacher-to-child ratios to ensure that teachers can provide children with the attention needed to guide their play and scaffold their learning. These limits also require more teachers, and thus more dollars.

### **Do Existing Policies Encourage (or Leave Space for) Playful Learning**

Illinois, like other states, responded to the U.S. Department of Education’s Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge.<sup>9</sup> The application required states to articulate systems for assessing children and monitoring programs. Importantly, the call for proposals required states to think across systems, to help move beyond variation associated with different funding sources (state pre-kindergarten versus child care subsidies versus Head Start). Here, I will focus on recent trends and the current status of two aspects of policy over which states have control: (1) quality definitions (and measures used) in quality rating and information systems and (2) early learning standards. Although these specifics may change as Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grants are announced (and as states implement promised changes in their applications), there are several persisting issues related to whether and how policies can promote playful learning.<sup>10</sup> State quality-rating and information systems meet several objectives, including offering child care providers incentives to improve quality and parents information to choose quality. Like restaurant ratings, these systems attach stars to centers (and family day care providers) that reflect their level of quality, and parents can use these stars to choose a setting. Providers also receive a higher subsidy for each higher star rating. Typically, the programs include a rating of the learning environment.

Illinois began its *Quality Counts* system in July 2007 with four star levels. Currently



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<sup>8</sup> Bredekamp, Sue. (1991). “Redeveloping Early Childhood Education: A Response to Kessler.” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 6, 199-209. Quote is from p. 202.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/index.html>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www2.illinois.gov/earlychildhood/Pages/EarlyLearningChallenge.aspx>.

<sup>11</sup> Thelma Harms, Richard M. Clifford, and Debby Cryer. *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Revised Edition*, (New York, N.Y.: Teachers College Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Gordon, Rachel A., Ken Fujimoto, Robert Kaestner, Sanders Korenman, and Kristin Abner. (Forthcoming) "An Assessment of the Validity of the ECERS-R with Implications for Assessments of Child Care Quality and its Relation to Child Development." *Developmental Psychology*.

<sup>13</sup> Scott-Little, Catherine, Kagan, Sharon Lynn, and Frelow, Victoria Stebbins. (2003). "Creating the conditions for success with early learning standards: Results from a national study of state-level standards for children's learning prior to kindergarten." *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Illinois State Board of Education. (2004). *Illinois Early Learning Standards*. Quote from Page 5.

<sup>15</sup> Abner, Kristin, Rachel A. Gordon, Robert Kaestner and Sanders Korenman. 2011. "Association of Child Care Type, Intensity, and Quality with Child Outcomes: A Replication and Extension."

<sup>16</sup> Gordon, Rachel A., Colaner, Anna, Usdansky, Margaret L., Melgar, Claudia. 2011. "Beyond an "Either/Or" Approach to Home- and Center-Based Child Care Choices: Characteristics of Families who Combine Types or Use Just One."

(in 2011), ratings on the Environment Rating Scales contribute to star ratings.<sup>11</sup> This measure is used by most states, but has been widely critiqued, and many states are shifting to a new measure, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS).<sup>12</sup> This shift offers several potential advantages. For example, although the Environment Rating Scales were designed under the umbrella framework of developmentally appropriate practice, the scale uses concrete items that make it easy for providers to raise their scores in ways that may be unrelated to child development (e.g., items on health and safety like consistently washing hands and covering outlets). In contrast, the CLASS broadly assesses the emotional and instructional support the teacher provides to students as well as the level of organization in the classroom. Although the CLASS has not yet been fully validated for widespread policy adoption, a shift to such a new measure in the quality rating system has the potential to increase providers' incentives to deliver playful learning.

The move toward accountability in education also has led to an explosion of states implementing early learning standards during the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> Illinois was one of the early adopters of early learning standards, drafting standards in 2000 and releasing them in final form in 2004. The Illinois standards included a number of guiding principles, one of which is that "Young children learn through active exploration of their environment in child-initiated and teacher-selected activities."<sup>14</sup> Illinois' pre-kindergarten program—Preschool for All—requires curricula to align with the early learning standards, but does not require specific curricula. Although such avoidance of prescribing a single curriculum is consistent with professional recommendations, it is not clear how the state verifies that curricula align with standards (and that day-to-day practice in classrooms follows these curricula and standards). As the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge pushes the

state toward aligning quality assessment across the subsidy and pre-kindergarten systems, there is an opportunity to put into place policies and regulations that further ensure alignment of curricula with standards and of practice with curricula.

### Which Policies Could Support Playful Learning

As noted above, playful learning has been shown to promote child development. Thus, it meets political and public goals of promoting school readiness and reducing achievement gaps. Children also enjoy play, and many parents and advocates want young children to not only be safe and learn in preschool or child care, but also to "have a good day" while they are there. Strategies like those discussed in the prior section can help promote playful learning in preschool.

Scholars, child advocates and community leaders are also beginning to think in creative ways about how playful learning can be broadly encouraged in society. At present, home-visiting programs work with parents, but relatively few programs target the broader array of caregivers, including relatives, neighbors and family day care providers. Approaches like LearningGames® can be used in homes as well as child care centers, however, and could be used to promote playful learning among children who spend their entire day in home-based child care. Some parents may also prefer that their three- and four-year-olds split their time between a home setting and preschool, rather than spending their entire day in a school or center, recognizing that spending long hours in large group settings is stressful for young children.<sup>15</sup> In fact, my colleagues and I recently found that nationally nearly one-fifth of four-year-olds split their time between child care in a home and a center, and their parents report that both getting their child ready for school and having a provider who shared their beliefs was important to them.<sup>16</sup>

One innovative model pioneered by Illinois Action for Children, called Community Connections, helps parents combine care arrangements in this way.<sup>17</sup> The program allows preschoolers to stay in family day care part of the week while attending preschool the rest of the time. Under the model, three- and four-year-olds attend Illinois' state pre-kindergarten program—Preschool for All—in half-day sessions four days a week. The program transports children between family day care and preschool. While the child is in preschool, their home-based provider can focus attention on the other children, usually infants and toddlers, in her care. On the fifth day, center teachers visit the family day-care setting, demonstrating pieces of the preschool curriculum and offering

books and materials. An implementation study of the program was recently released, documenting the positive experiences of parents, teachers and providers. Both parents and home-based providers report learning new ways to engage the child. Parents report having thought about enrolling their children in preschool full time, but hesitating to switch from their family day-care provider and being concerned about the fit with their work schedules. This program allowed them to keep their existing provider and routine, while allowing the child to attend preschool. To date, the program has served just a small number of families. A larger scale evaluation of the program, which may provide evidence to expand it, is planned.



<sup>17</sup> [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_1036.pdf](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_1036.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> McCoy, Kelsey J. "Summary of 2011 Illinois Family Impact Seminar," <http://igpa.uillinois.edu/content/2011-family-impact-seminar>.

This chapter is a component of the 2011 Illinois Family Impact Seminar, on the topic of *Learning to Play, Playing to Learn: The Importance of Play in Early Childhood and the Transition to School*.

The seminar began with an event in Aurora on Saturday, February 19, 2011 attended by more than 150 Illinois child care providers and educators. Keynote speaker Kathy Hirsh-Pasek argued for changing the lens we use to look at learning in early childhood.

She presented scholarly evidence documenting that play is an integral part of cognitive, emotional, and social development. When children are playing, Hirsh-Pasek said, they are building their skills in "The 6Cs:" collaboration, communication, critical thinking, content, confidence, and creative innovation. She argued that:

- As we enter the "knowledge age," integrating information and innovation is key, which requires much more than simply memorizing facts and words. It requires creative, critical thinking skills in collaborative environments. Laying the foundation for this type of thinking begins in the earliest stages of life.
- Time for play in classrooms has declined significantly in the past 10

years. Some of this time is being replaced by test preparation.

- Our society confuses learning with memorization and test scores with success. This does not prepare children to meet the challenges of the 21st century.
- Research has shown that students who engaged in guided play at an early age consistently perform better as they advance through the school system.<sup>18</sup>

Hirsh-Pasek is a decorated academic scholar and a best-selling author. She is the Stanley and Debra Lefkowitz Professor in the Department of Psychology at Temple University, where she co-directs the Infant Language Laboratory and is the co-founder of CiRCLE (The Center for Re-Imagining Children's Learning and Education). Her research has been funded by the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health and Human Development and published in leading journals such as *Child Development*, *Developmental Psychology*, and the *SRCD Monographs*. Her academic awards include the American Psychological Association's Award for Distinguished Service and Bronfenbrenner Award for Lifetime Contribution to Developmental Psychology in the Service of Science and

Society. She is the author of popular books about child development, including: *Einstein Never Used Flashcards* (which won the *Books for Better Life Award* as the best psychology book in 2003) and *A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool*.

#### Acknowledgments

The Illinois Family Impact Seminar is an annual series directed by Dr. Rachel Gordon at the University of Illinois' Institute of Government and Public Affairs. The series connects decision makers with research evidence to inform pressing family policy issues. The Illinois Family Impact Seminars benefit from the good advice of members of the Policy Network for Family Impact Seminars, directed by Karen Bogenschneider at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the members of the Illinois Family Impact Seminars advisory committee.

The 2011 seminar was co-sponsored by Illinois Action for Children (<http://www.actforchildren.org>). We are also grateful to Representatives Linda Chapa La Via, D-Aurora, and Roger Eddy, R-Hutsonville, who co-hosted a legislative reception on the topic. Additional materials and video of the 2011 seminar can be found at <http://igpa.uillinois.edu/PE/fis2011>.