



# The Power of Play

*Bringing the science  
of learning & development  
to life through*

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, **“Play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child.”**<sup>1</sup> Most definitions of play highlight the goals of enjoyment or recreation and these definitions recognize that play typically does not require a practical purpose. Play can include imaginative play, rough and tumble play, and competitive or cooperative games. When children play together, they develop critical social and emotional skills like collaboration and leadership.<sup>2</sup> Through play, children, youth, and adults discover the joy of being active. And research shows that active kids are stronger learners.<sup>3</sup> Play is essential to how our brains develop, and it contributes to creativity and flexible thinking.

Children and youth build relationships with each other and with adult educators when they play together, and these relationships are different from the relationships they develop in an instructional setting. These relationships can create safe environments<sup>4</sup> and a sense of belonging for everyone. Playing together creates shared experiences and goals, even among children and adults who may feel different from one another. Intentionally building play into everyone’s educational experience gives educators *and* youth a chance to maximize what we all need to learn and develop: safe and active engagement with learning and relationship-building in real-world settings.



**PLAYWORKS**



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# The Science of Learning & Development

The science of learning and development brings together **research from neuroscience, epigenetics, learning science, social and emotional learning, early childhood development, the science of adversity, and human development.** This research tells us that young people's learning is integrated with every aspect of their existence: The brain is nested in the body, and the body is nested in the young person's physical, cultural, cognitive, and emotional environment.

Because thinking, feeling, and relationships are all inextricably linked together in producing learning and development, **we must ensure that education is optimized for whole child development.** Young people need to develop socially, emotionally, physically, and psychologically, because these elements of the whole person are as important to development and growth as learning in core content areas like reading, writing, and math. Key findings from this new field highlight five components of whole child development: (1) rich learning experiences, (2) positive developmental relationships, (3) environments filled with safety and belonging, (4) integrated support systems, and (5) development of knowledge, skills, mindsets, and habits.

“A game is the voluntary attempt to overcome an unnecessary challenge.”

– Bernard Suits



# How Playworks Plays

**It is critical to create the conditions for play that will result in the relationships we aim to build.** Being intentional about play means explicitly focusing on:

1. Creating environments filled with safety and belonging, where everyone has an opportunity to play, there are shared agreements and norms, and players can adapt the games to the situation.
2. [Fostering positive developmental relationships](#) by encouraging adults to play alongside children, promoting active inclusion for everyone, and using games as a fun way to resolve conflict.
3. Creating rich learning experiences that intentionally focus on critical knowledge, skills, mindsets, and habits by making sure learning is fun, everyone can make mistakes and learn from them, and children know what to expect.

**These practices are all nonnegotiable components of whole child development.**

“When youth play together, they develop critical social and emotional skills like collaboration and leadership. Play is essential to [how our brains develop](#), and it contributes to creativity and flexible thinking.”

– Elizabeth Cushing, Playworks CEO



## About Playworks

Playworks’ core insight is that safe and healthy play can support any child’s positive development. By creating opportunities for inclusive and active play, elementary school educators and families can tap children’s intrinsic motivation to have fun and reap cognitive, social, emotional, and physical benefits. Playworks’ partnerships with schools range from placing full-time staff in schools to providing robust professional development for educators and administrators. Virtual resources and training are also available, making it simple to access and benefit from Playworks’ expertise. Playworks has demonstrated in thousands of elementary schools nationwide that creating a welcoming and safe playground is achievable and can have a positive influence on youth and educators. External evaluations of Playworks<sup>5</sup> show a positive impact for schools by improving school climate and for individual students by supporting their development of social and emotional skills and preventing bullying behaviors.

Creating environments filled with

# Safety & Belonging

- **Everyone has an opportunity to play.** Any game can have as many players as there are youth and adults who want to play. This may mean having to adapt the game, or it may mean having to take turns or vary roles, but anyone and everyone can play. Youth voice is essential; kids choose how and what they'd like to play.
- **There are shared agreements, norms, and game rules.** Shared norms and rules create a sense of safety for everyone, extending to practices such as how youth resolves conflicts, what happens when a player is “out,” and how players are invited into the game or chosen for teams.
- **Things can change, and there is potential to adapt the game to the conditions and who is playing.** Adaptation gives youth and adults the agency to make changes to the game in the way that works best for all players and settings. And not every game needs to have a winner; some games may end based on time or a set number of rounds of play.



*Adaptable games like four-square (pictured) or three-line basketball encourage many players to come together, and give players the opportunity to practice social and emotional skills like being patient while waiting and giving encouragement to teammates.*

When youth and adults play together, they level the playing field. Everyone is a player, can make mistakes, and has a chance to build positive relationships with each other.



## Fostering Positive Developmental Relationships

- **Young people and adults play alongside each other.** Adults aren't just there to be the referee—the adults can and should get in the game to model the norms of kindness, inclusion, and fun.
- **Strategies, practices, and games promote active inclusion and getting to know each other.** Creating an inclusive play environment means adults or youth peers are actively inviting each other into the game and playing alongside them. For games that require establishing teams, there are silly games to do that, eliminating the fear of being “picked” or not.

*A quick round of Rock Paper Scissors easily resolves a conflict so we can get back to the game.*

- **Games can be used to resolve conflict.** Conflict resolution games leverage the fun of playing to teach kids that conflicts don't have to be barriers. An arbitrary game that doesn't require physical skill or persuasion, like Rock Paper Scissors, is quick and gets right to the point of solving the disagreement. Game strategies for conflict resolution keep the game going and create a sense of safety because all players are using the same strategy.



*Creating rich learning experiences  
that intentionally focus on*

# Knowledge, Skills, Mindsets, and Habits

- **Learning is fun and engaging.** All people learn best when they are active participants and receive real-time feedback. Play enables young people to develop critical social and emotional skills like cooperation and teamwork, leadership, confidence, self-management, and executive function—skills that are essential to healthy relationships throughout life.
- **Everyone can make mistakes** and all players can get “out,” but the game keeps going. Children learn from adults and will learn how to respond effectively to mistakes or failures when adults model and share their experiences too.
- **Everyone has, and can continue to develop, their own agency.** When it comes to play, children have as much mastery as adults. Playworks’ strategies emphasize engaging young people as leaders in resolving conflicts and in starting, continuing, and adapting the games.
- **Children and adults both know what to expect, which reduces stress and creates a positive school climate.** When young people know the adults are ready and willing to play—especially at the start of class or during transitions—they show up ready to learn and engage with their peers.



*Attention-getting strategies during transitions help to ease stress and make changes fun. Young people show up calmer and more ready to learn when they know what to expect and feel engaged with their peers and educators.*



*When young people play together, they learn how to work together to achieve goals as a team.*

## About This Brief

The American Institutes for Research and Playworks collaborated to identify the essential Playworks practices and strategies and align them with the practice components of the science of learning and development. This brief summarizes the synergy of:

1. What we know from the science makes for effective learning and development
2. How Playworks supports safe and healthy play

### Learn More About Playworks' Approach

- [Playworks' Six Design Principles](#)
- [Playworks Game Library](#)
- [The Great Recess Framework](#)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ginsburg, K. R. (2007). The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds. *Pediatrics*, 119(1), 182–191. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2006-2697>

<sup>2</sup> Massey, W., & Geldhof, J. (2019). An examination of recess quality and student behavior. College of Public Health and Human Sciences at Oregon State University.

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). Health and academic achievement overview. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, US Dept of Health and Human Services; [http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health\\_and\\_academics/pdf/health-academic-achievement.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/health-academic-achievement.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> London, R. A., Westrich, L., Stokes-Guinan, K., & McLaughlin, M. (2015). Playing fair: The contribution of high-functioning recess to overall school climate in low-income elementary schools. *Journal of School Health*, 85(1), 53–60.

<sup>5</sup> Such as those by Massey and Geldhof in 2019 and London and colleagues in 2015.



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