

provide the base for young children to engage with others, to explore with confidence, to seek support when needed, and to view interactions with others as likely to be positive and interesting. Recognizing the power of early relationships, preschool teachers and programs build strong relationships with children and families. Just as important, preschool teachers nurture the social-emotional development of young children through those relationships. Research shows that healthy social-emotional development helps young children learn, for example, to sustain attention more easily, to make and maintain friendships, and to communicate needs and ideas. Under the guiding eye of teachers in close partnership with families, young children build their ability to engage in relationships with adults and other children. Preschool offers children a variety of opportunities for social interactions (with familiar adults, peers), group participation, and for cooperation and responsibility. A climate of caring and respect that promotes nurturing relationships between children and within the community of families supports children's learning in all domains.

Play is a primary context for learning

Play is at the heart of young children's explorations and their engagement in learning experiences.¹⁸ During play, children maximize their attention span as they focus on self-selected activities that they regulate themselves. When children make their own choices, engage other children in interaction, and spend time amusing themselves on their own, they learn much about themselves, their own capabilities, and the world around them. At the preschool level, play and learning should be seamless. Children need to



be *engaged* to learn. As Zigler observes, children bring more than their brains to school.¹⁹ When children's hearts and minds are engaged, adults can help them learn almost anything they are ready to learn. In a program where play is valued, children's interests, engagement, creativity, and self-expression are supported through a balance of child-initiated and teacher-guided activities. The environment reflects an appreciation for the value of pretend play, imaginary play, and dramatic play. Play not only provides the context for thinking, building knowledge, being attentive, solving problems, and increasing social skills, it also helps children to integrate their emotional experiences and internalize guidance from their teachers. For some children, it may be necessary to make special adaptations to create access to learning through self-initiated activities and play.

Learning is integrated

Learning engages young children in every possible way. Young children continually use all their senses and competencies to relate new experiences to prior experiences and try to understand things and create meaning. Their learning is integrated while often having a specific focus. For example, during book reading, children use their knowledge and thinking abilities, emotional responses, under-