



Summer of Play 3-Part Series (Part 2)

PATTERNS OF PLAY

UNDERSTANDING STAGES & SCHEMAS

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Video

Please review the professional development training video; you will need approximately 60 minutes to complete the training.



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Please take a moment to complete the learning review provided. Upon submission, your certification will be sent to you immediately.

Start



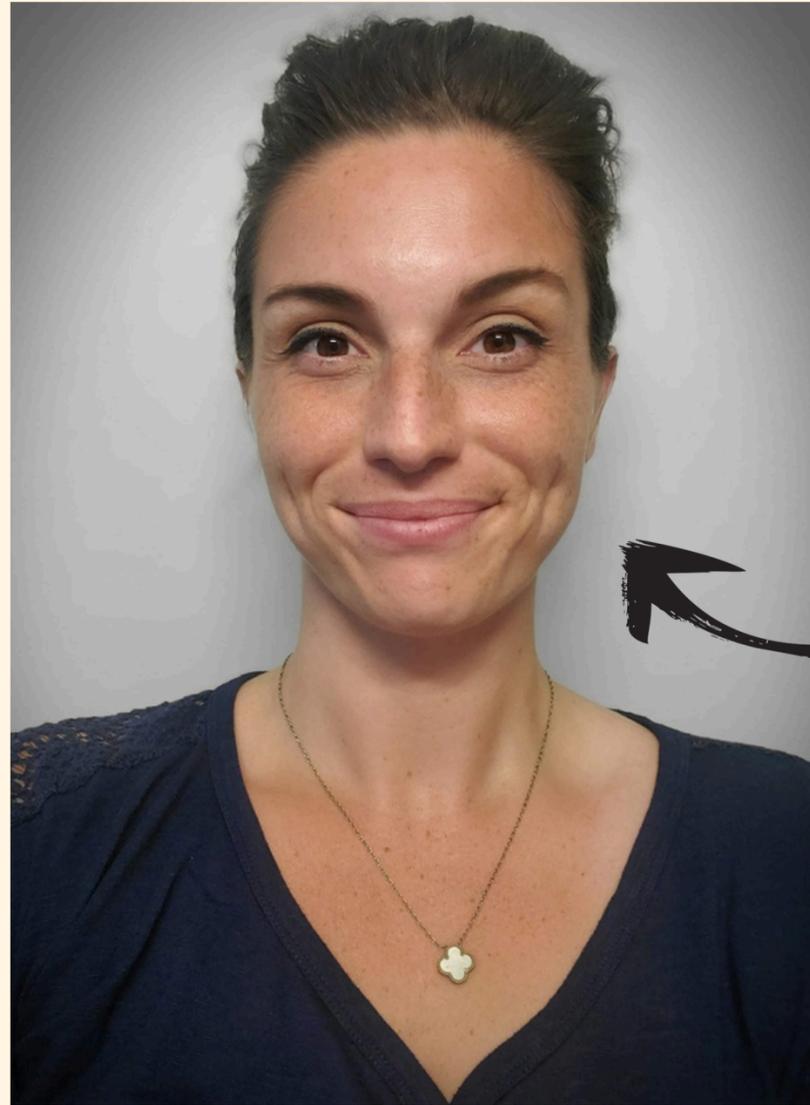
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Before We Begin...

- **This is a recorded session.** The slides and recording will be emailed to you, so you can watch it anytime at your convenience.
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- **If you have questions,** please drop them in the chat. We'll do our best to answer everyone's questions at the end of the presentation.



AND THESE ARE A FEW OF MY FAVORITE THINGS...



THAT'S ME



My web-slinging 6.5 year old daughter



Our cats (Venom & Carnage)

Stephanie Seidler



- Director & Content Creator of WSH
- M.Ed. in School Leadership
- 20+ Years in ECE Field



Creating children's picture books

What is Play?

Play is a self-chosen, self-directed, intrinsically motivated activity through which children explore, experiment, and make sense of the world.

It is a natural and essential way in which children interact with the world, **make sense of their experiences, and develop foundational cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills** (typically utilizing all domains simultaneously).

It's Personalized and Adaptive: Play meets each child exactly where they are developmentally, offering the perfect level of challenge.

It May Look Like:

- **Physical + Sensory** (running, climbing, pouring, squeezing)
- **Creative + Imaginative** (painting, storytelling, pretend play)
- **Cognitive + Social** (building, negotiating roles, problem-solving)

Play is a biological drive (just like sleep or hunger) wired into the brain for survival, adaptation, and long-term well-being. It is the mechanism through which the brain builds intelligence, resilience, and emotional health.





Unoccupied Play



Solitary Play



Onlooker Play



Parallel Play

Stages of Play

The Six Stages of Play describe the developmental progression of social interaction in play, from playing alone to engaging in cooperative group activities.

Coined by Mildred Parten Newhall (1902–1970): an American sociologist whose 1929 doctoral research at the University of Minnesota on preschool social participation led to the six-stage framework still used in early childhood education today.



Associative Play



Cooperative Play



Stages of Play	Definition + Developmentally Appropriate Social Expectation
Unoccupied Play: Birth–3 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child engages in seemingly aimless movement or quiet observation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ The brain is wiring for attachment and stress regulation. Social-emotional skills come through caregiver co-regulation, not from other babies.
Solitary Play: 0–2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child plays alone, fully focused on their own activity. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ The prefrontal cortex is immature; executive function (impulse control, memory, flexibility) isn't online. They can't regulate or share, so peers add little. Learning comes from adult modeling and responsiveness.
Onlooker Play: 2–3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child watches others play without joining - Observation without participation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Early executive function emerges, but theory of mind (seeing another's perspective) isn't developed. Parallel play may appear, but social growth still depends on caregiver guidance.
Parallel Play: 2.5–3.5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child plays alongside peers using similar materials - Participation without interaction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Social learning happens through shared space, exposure to others' play styles, and incidental imitation. Collaboration should not be expected yet.
Associative Play: 3–4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child begins casual interaction (e.g. sharing materials, talking, imitating, etc.) without a shared goal. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Theory of mind begins and prefrontal–amygdala connections strengthen. Children attempt turn-taking and empathy, but still need adult scaffolding — peers don't yet teach each other regulation.
Cooperative Play: 4+ years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child works with peers toward a common goal or theme. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ With maturing executive function and theory of mind, true cooperation, fairness, and reciprocity appear. Now peers add value — but only on the foundation laid by caregivers in the earliest years.

Setting the Record Straight: Onlooker Play

- **Myth: Watching isn't play.**
 - **Truth:** Observation is active learning — children take in ideas and strategies by watching others.
- **Myth: Onlookers are disengaged.**
 - **Truth:** Onlooker play builds social awareness and prepares children to join in when they're ready.
- **Myth: Children who don't jump right in lack confidence, while those who do are more confident.**
 - **Truth:** Confidence shows in different ways — pausing to observe can be just as confident as participating right away, and immediate entry doesn't always mean confidence.
- **Myth: Being observant means being antisocial.**
 - **Truth:** Onlooker play is social — children are actively studying group dynamics and peer interactions without direct involvement.





Trajectory



Transformation



Enclosing



Connecting



Transporting

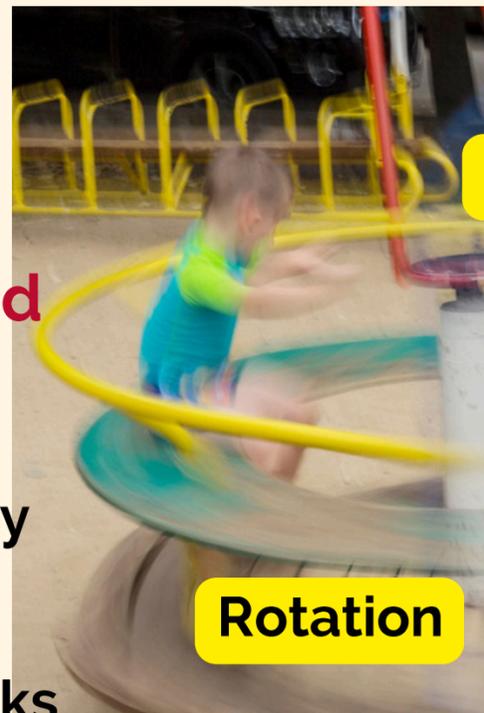


Orientation

Play Schemas

Play schemas are repeated patterns of behavior children use to explore and make sense of the world.

- First described by Jean Piaget as cognitive structures, later expanded by Chris Athey to show how they manifest in children's play.
- Children often shift between schemas and combine them in play, e.g., stacking blocks (enclosure), lining them up (positioning), knocking them down (trajectory), collecting them (transporting), and mixing them with toys (transforming).
- **Schemas are not learning styles.** They are natural behavioral drives, not fixed preferences.
- **Schemas are not one-size-fits-all.** Children engage with different schemas depending on their interests and developmental needs.



Rotation



Enveloping



Positioning

Definining The Nine Play Schemas:

- **Trajectory:** Exploring how objects and bodies move through space.
 - **Example:** Throwing a ball, pouring water, watching things fall.
- **Rotation:** Exploring circular movement of objects or self.
 - **Example:** Spinning wheels, turning knobs, twirling around.
- **Enclosure:** Creating or exploring boundaries and enclosed spaces.
 - **Example:** Building fences, drawing closed shapes, making forts.
- **Enveloping:** Covering or wrapping objects or self.
 - **Example:** Wrapping toys in fabric, hiding under blankets, placing items in bags.
- **Transporting:** Moving objects from one place to another.
 - **Example:** Carrying blocks in a basket, filling & emptying containers.

- **Positioning:** Arranging objects in order, pattern, or symmetry.
 - **Example:** Lining up cars, stacking blocks, sorting by size or color.
- **Connecting:** Joining and separating materials or objects.
 - **Example:** Linking train tracks, taping pieces together, snapping blocks apart.
- **Transformation:** Changing the form, appearance, or state of something.
 - **Example:** Mixing paint colors, melting ice, cooking play.
- **Orientation:** Viewing objects from different angles or positions.
 - **Example:** Looking through a hole, hanging upside down, tilting head to see.

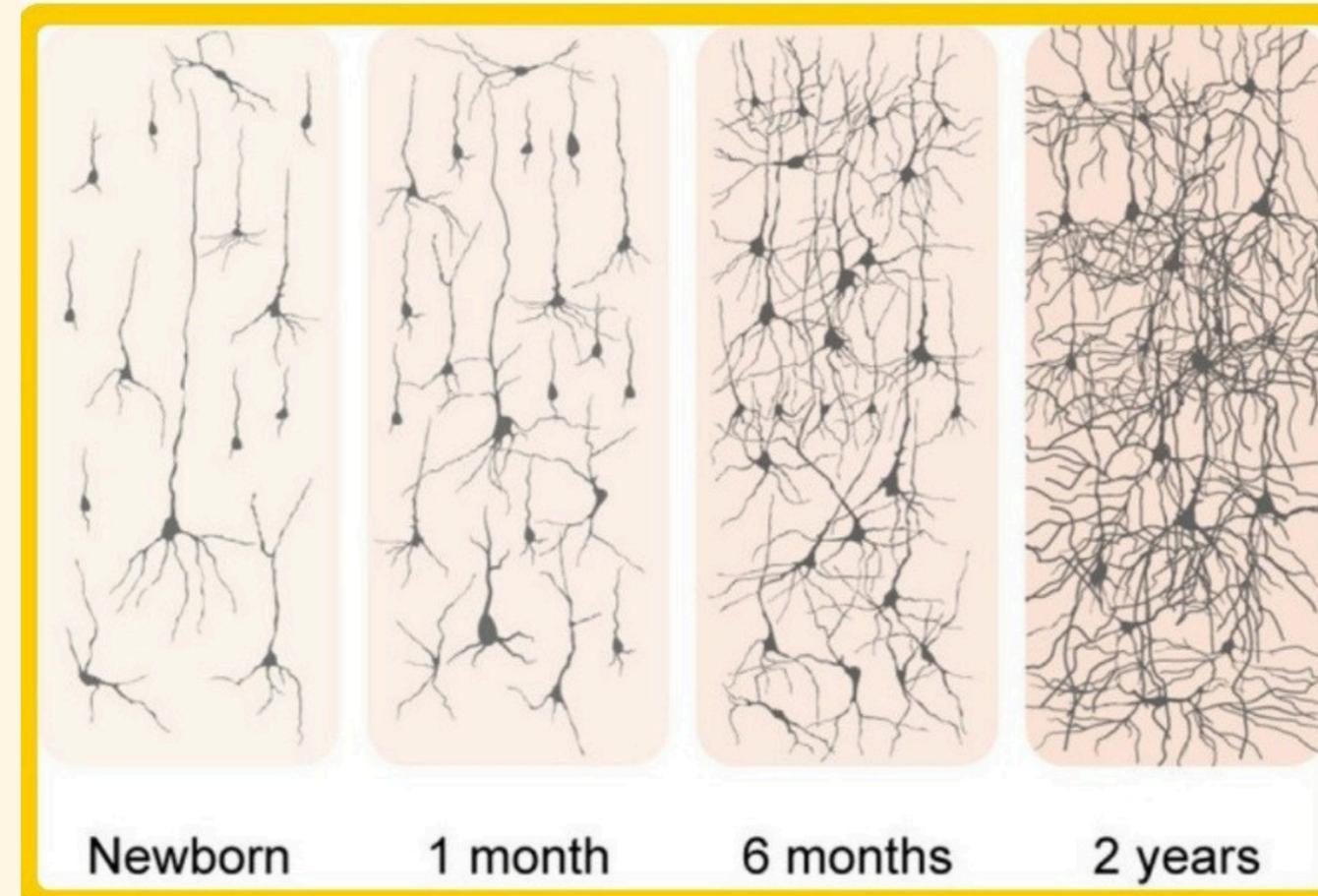
Lets Look at Two Schemas In Particular...

Category	Trajectory	Positioning
<p>What It May Look Like</p>	<p>Throwing toys, food, or objects across the room; dumping bins; dropping items over and over; running wildly back and forth; splashing water everywhere</p>	<p>Lining up cars, blocks, or figurines instead of “playing with them the right way”; insisting on arranging objects in rows, circles, or patterns; spacing items precisely; stopping others from moving what they've placed</p>
<p>Why It's Normal</p>	<p>Children are investigating movement, force, speed, and cause-and-effect — repetition is how they learn physics with their bodies and objects.</p>	<p>Arranging and ordering give children predictability, control, and a way to make sense of their environment — it's a natural cognitive process.</p>
<p>What the Experience Provides</p>	<p>Builds spatial awareness, hand-eye coordination, muscle control, scientific reasoning, and even emotional release through movement.</p>	<p>Strengthens pattern recognition, sequencing, math readiness, organization skills, attention to detail, and self-regulation.</p>
<p>When to Be Concerned</p>	<p>If throwing is deliberately aggressive and aimed at hurting others, or the child cannot use safe outlets despite guidance.</p>	<p>If lining up is the only play a child engages in for extended periods, or if the child becomes extremely distressed when the arrangement is altered.</p>

Repetition is a Crucial Component of Schemas & Brain Development

Children need to perform the same actions again and again in order to test ideas, build understanding, and strengthen brain connections.

- **Repetition Wires the Brain:** Each repeat strengthens neural pathways.
- **Confidence & Mastery:** Success through practice builds “I can do this.”
- **Motivation & Memory:** Dopamine rewards persistence, locking in learning.
- **Deepens Understanding:** Repetition expands concepts & adds complexity.
- **Supports Self-Regulation:** Familiar patterns calm & organize the mind.
- **Fuels Creativity:** Once mastered, children experiment & problem-solve.



Center for Excellence in Brain Science and Intelligence Technology, Chinese Academy of Science 2022

The scans and study reveals that from birth to age two, the brain experiences rapid synaptic growth, forming numerous connections essential for cognitive and emotional development. Repetition plays a crucial role in this process, as repeated experiences and activities help strengthen and reinforce synaptic pathways.

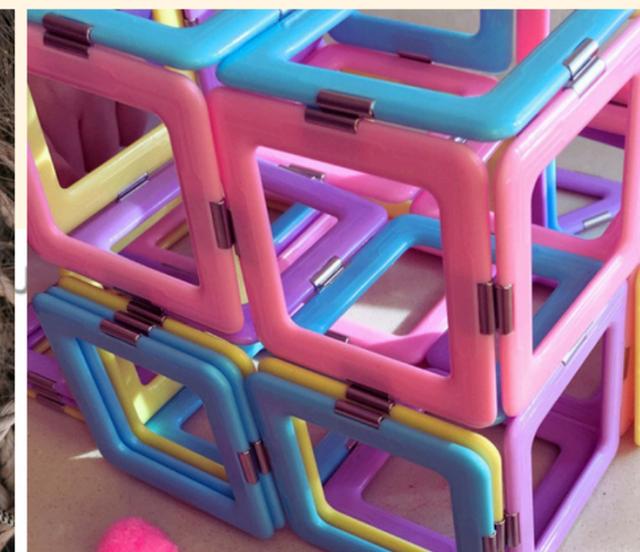
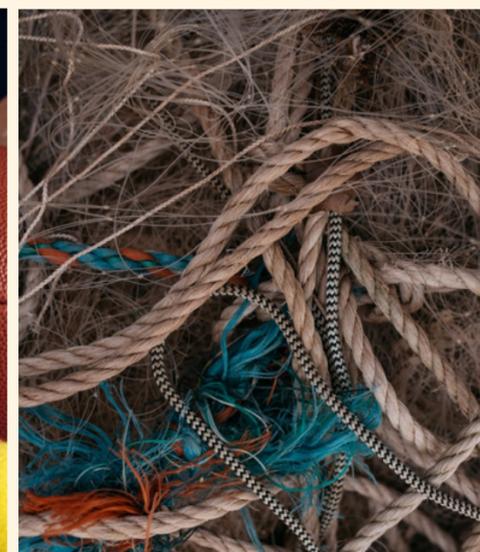


Indoor Schema Materials

1. **Balls:** various sizes and textures
2. **Loose Parts:** shells, corks, wooden discs, pinecones
3. **Fabric Pieces:** scarves, blankets, cloth remnants
4. **Blocks:** wooden, foam, or magnetic
5. **Ramps & Gutters:** planks, cardboard, PVC tubes
6. **Containers:** baskets, buckets, boxes, tubs
7. **Ropes & String:** natural fiber, yarn, shoelaces
8. **Wheels:** toy wheels, spools, old casters
9. **Clay or Playdough:** for molding and transformation
10. **Cardboard Boxes:** small to large sizes
11. **Legos, Magnets, & Magnetic Tiles:** connecting, building
12. **Fabric Pockets or Bags:** for enveloping and transporting
13. **Stacking Cups & Nesting Bowls:** positioning, enclosing

Outdoor Schema Materials

1. **Balls:** various sizes and textures
2. **Loose Parts:** rocks, seed pods, driftwood, natural materials
3. **Sticks & Branches:** various lengths and thicknesses
4. **Sand & Dirt:** loose-fill sensory bases
5. **Water Tubs:** for pouring, floating, and sinking play
6. **Funnels & Tubes:** for transferring solids or liquids
7. **Crates & Pallets:** for stacking, building, transporting
8. **Rolling Pins & Cylinders:** for flattening, rolling, rotating
9. **Hoops & Rings:** hula hoops, wooden embroidery hoops
10. **Pulley Systems:** simple rope and bucket setups
11. **Balance Beams:** planks or logs for walking and orientation
12. **Blocks with Holes & Pegs:** connecting, positioning, rotation
13. **Trolleys, Wagons, or Wheelbarrows:** transporting, trajectory





Expectation	What They Need
Play is separate from “real learning.”	Play is learning — it drives cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth all at once.
Infants and toddlers must be socialized early.	Early stages of play (solitary, onlooker) are essential; rich social learning comes through caregivers and gradual peer engagement — without pressure.
Preschoolers need new activities daily and new themes weekly.	Depth over novelty — repetition and revisiting materials build mastery, confidence, and long-term memory.
Messy, repetitive, and movement play are distractions.	Schema-driven, sensory-rich play wires the brain from the body up and strengthens focus, problem-solving, and self-regulation.
Older preschoolers should always be in structured, cooperative play.	Children move fluidly between all stages; unstructured, child-led exploration lays the foundation for collaboration, resilience, and future academics.

Questions? Let's Hear Them!

- Add your comments or questions in the chat!
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NEXT WEBINAR: (Part 3) Brave Play: Risk, Weapons, Destruction & the Freedom to Explore

When: Wednesday, September 24th (12:00PM EST)

