Toddler Play: Promoting Healthy Social & Emotional Development

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Playing is a means for young children to:

- Process aspects of life:
  - Experiences – ranging from everyday to stressful
  - Emotions – including anger, sadness, anxiety, joy, fear
    - Helps with emotion regulation
- Figure out self
  - What I like, what I don't like; Who am I?
  - In relation to others
- Figure out how the world works
  - Throwing = gravity
  - Banging = noise
  - Building = balance
- Practice and develop social skills
- Being in control – "I can be the one who leaves," "I can be the doctor."

What does play do for young children?

- Helps children make sense of their own experiences – play stems from within the child
- Executive Functions are developed in play
  - Focus and Persistence
    - Figuring something out – how it works, what it does
    - Trying it different ways
  - Flexibility
    - There's no one right way – "I can do it different ways"
    - It's not about getting it right
    - It's about the journey or the process
  - Handling disappointment (emotion regulation)-Mistakes are not mistakes –part of the process
  - Agency- "I can do this!"
- Cooperation – learning to do things together, work out conflicts and negotiate
- Resilience- going back and trying again until a goal is achieved can come after frustration, re-doing and trial and error.

Teachers have an important role in supporting play

- Understand where each child is developmentally
  - Needs vary and change for children over time
  - There are commonalities across age groups as well as individual differences. Both commonalities & individuality need to be considered and respected

- Consistency and routine equal predictability. Set up room in organized and consistent manner (same materials in same place; no sudden changes). It provides children with feelings of security (I know where things are and I can count on them being there.)
  - When children feel safe, they can play and explore more freely
  - Routines guide children through the day, help with transitions and foster independence
  - Young children lack a sense of time—routines guide them instead
  - Allow for choice – of where to play, what to play with – which provides the child with power and control within a structured environment

- Use short, simple statements to help children express their needs and emotions
  - "Beep Beep" to another child in their way
  - "I'm not done yet."
  - "That made you angry." "You can tell him no."

- Young children feel a wide range of emotions from happy, exuberant to frustration, anger, and sadness

- Recognize and be aware of your own responses to children's negative emotions
  - Children express emotions openly and strongly. Knowing ourselves well helps to support the child's needs.
  - Talk about your experience of emotions with other teachers. Did a child's anger really upset you? Does it upset you when children are aggressive? The better you understand yourself, the more available you are to help children.

Practical suggestions that work at our school:

- Family photos in the classroom – provides a bridge between home and school
- Buckets, baskets, bags – provide alternatives for *throwing*, *hoarding,* and *dumping; allow child to carry something of 'my own' filled with what they ned*
- Open-ended art projects with unlimited materials:
  - Paper on the wall for art; Playdough & clay; Collage
- Materials that support children's own experiences:
  - Experiences: doctor kits, farm or house with doors, garage with elevator, planes, steering wheels, kitchens, tool kits
  - Separation: books about separation, songs about separation, toys that reinforce going away and coming back (cash registers, tunnels, lock boxes)