

---

## Book Reviews

### **Developmentally Appropriate Play: Guiding Young Children to a Higher Level**

*Gaye Gronlund*

St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 2010.

Contents, illustrations, appendix, references, bibliography.

191 pp. \$32.95 paper. ISBN:

97816055440375

In my work, I frequently observe teachers in the classroom. Some of what I have noticed echoes what I have heard at conferences and workshops: Teachers are feeling pressured by new early learning standards and rising expectations for school readiness; They are unsure of how play fits into these demands; Officials have cut time devoted to play to create more time for early math and literacy activities; Teachers often use the time children are playing to catch up on paperwork or set up the next activities; Although it may be frustrating to see teachers take a hands-off approach to play, they may not always understand what is expected of them during that time; And, it is difficult to learn how to scaffold play skills. Addressing these issues in *Developmentally Appropriate Play*, Gaye Gronlund presents strategies that teach teachers the skills to help children thrive within the context of play experiences.

Gronlund brings her experience as a classroom teacher, author, and consultant to bear in promoting play as a primary pathway to learning. Her past work has included books on observing and assessing children and integrating early-learning standards into a preschool curriculum. In this book she challenges practitioners to facilitate a higher level of thinking and interacting by deepening children's play experiences. The early-childhood field, in recent times, has focused on interactions between adults and children. Robert Pianta developed the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) to evaluate teachers' exchanges with children. Gronlund's book adds another dimension to this discussion.

In the foreword to the book, Ellen Frede of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) describes the variety of approaches she observes in classrooms: Some teachers set up the environment but interact very little during play; Others pull children out for small groups and other cognitive activities. She writes, "I have found that the hardest concepts for teachers to learn are how to effectively include play in the classroom and the teacher's role in play" (p. xiii). Gronlund addresses these two issues

throughout the rest of the book. She argues that to encourage developmentally appropriate play, teachers need to know how to include play in the classroom and how to define their own role in it. In the first two chapters, she discusses the importance of play, especially the concept of a high level of play (p. 24). The next two chapters outline how to plan for and set up an engaging play environment in the early-childhood setting. Following this, she presents strategies to increase intentional and purposeful interactions between children and adults in play scenarios. In chapter 7, she provides examples of math and literacy representations offered in play. The last chapter focuses on standards and how they are met in play.

The book contains stories, examples, concrete activities, and illustrations throughout, making it accessible for all who are working directly with young children. Although clearly written for teachers in regular classroom settings, its insights and strategies could be applied in the work of special-education teachers, play therapists, and child-life workers. In addition, it would be valuable supplemental reading for courses in child development and children's play. Professional-development initiatives and students practicums could use this as a companion piece to supervision and coaching.

Although much has been written about facilitating play in the early-childhood classroom, Frede is right when she says teachers do not always know how to include play in the classroom, nor do they know what their roles are when they do. Setting up the environment seems to come easier for teachers, but interactions with children during play can be awkward and infrequent. Gronlund's suggestions give

teachers a picture of how their contacts could be structured during play. She provides concrete strategies—listing open-ended questions (p. 80), discussing ways to enter and exit play (p. 71), and suggesting what to watch for as you do (p. 76)—to help adults become more deliberate in their interactions. She describes provocations as actions teachers take to provoke and stretch a child's thinking (p. 92). Provocations require a response and encourage problem solving. These provocations may include adding new and interesting material, reading a book, or taking a field trip. They may mean changing the configuration of the group so that children play with others they do not know well. She provides examples of representational activities in math and literacy and includes templates for use in a play bakery, restaurant, and doctor's office in the appendix (p. 171).

My one caution is not about the book, which is a helpful tool for those who work in the early-childhood field. It is a caution about what we expect. Many teachers cannot learn the skills required to move children to a higher level of play unless they also receive coaching, observation and feedback, and reflection time. Video recording helps teachers evaluate themselves. Reading a book is not enough. Teachers need the support of those who supervise them, train them, and coach them. As Gronlund points out, when teachers successfully learn to intentionally interact with children during play, we will see children engaged with the rapt "attention that children devote to a complex play experience" (p. 25).

---

—Sandra Heidemann, *The Saint Paul Foundation, St. Paul, MN*