

## The Project Approach to Learning at

**RisingOaks**  
Early Learning

| Saint John Paul II

**Project Name:** Understanding Play

**Age Group:** Infant (7.5 months-16 months)

**Project Start Date:** February 28, 2022

**Project End Date:** June 10, 2022



**RisingOaks**  
Early Learning

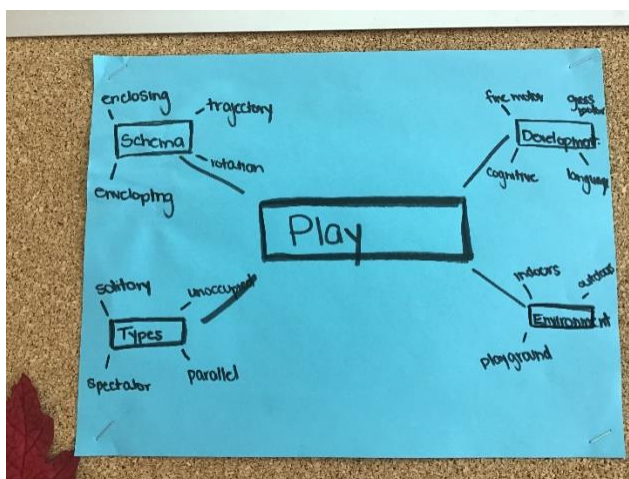
**Growing minds through play**

## Background

Our project on understanding play began to take shape on February 28, 2022. The infants in our program ranging from 8 months to 16 months are the centre of this project as we dive deeper into play, how it promotes infant development. Jennifer Silva RECE, Tami Sutton RECE, Connie Cunningham RECE and Judy Hackbart RECE are the educators whom facilitated in putting this project together. The interest in this project continued over the course of a few months and ended on June 10, 2022

## Phase 1: Beginning the Project

As the infant educators have been observing and documenting the infant's interests, we have noted the different ways they are engaging in their play. We watch them engage, notice there are different types of play and play styles, depending on age. As we dive into this project, we will look into the different types of play we observe and their specific actions when engaging in play. To further help us understand, we thought we would ask the following questions. What does play teach us? What types of play are there? Where can we play? When thinking about who may know the answer to these questions we thought we could ask a child development expert, our parents and educators or a play specialist.



*Figure 1 Infant web on play project*

## Phase 2: Developing the Project

We were able to ask families short survey questions to help us get an understanding of what they may want to know.

1. Are you curious about your child's play?
2. What do you notice your child playing with the most? (Providing options of toys, materials, nature objects).
3. Do you understand the learning happening during your child's play? With half our families responding, we noticed that parents are curious about their child's play. Some of our infants are interested in toys, but majority are interested in materials, for example pots and pans and Tupperware. When asked the question about understanding play we had a few parents respond to both yes and no. A parent made a comment that they feel they are missing something, or

that they do not always understand their play. We are hoping this project will further help the understanding of infant play and play development.

When first thinking about play and development as we observed, we noticed that schemas were a big part of what the infants are doing when engaged in play. Schema play is described as repeated patterns of play that children exhibit when they are exploring the world and trying to find out how things work. When we understand schemas, it helps us better understand a child's behaviour. Thinking about infants, we tend to focus on six schemas that are most predominant in their play and development.

**Enclosing** oneself, in an object or space. This teaches hand eye coordination, as they build balance. Structure is developed through this type of schema as well, as the Infants are learning about space. When a box was introduced, we noticed that the Infants were curious about putting things in the box and taking them out, as well as putting themselves inside the box and trying to close the flaps.



*Figure 2 George enclosing himself in a box*

**Enveloping** is covering or surrounding oneself, an objects or space. When enveloping the infants are learning about different fabric textures. Some fabrics will support imaginative play. Games like peek-a-boo, hide and seek or hide the object will extend play. Tunnels allow the infants to be surrounded by an object giving them a quiet space to be alone or have some fun interactions with peers and educators, when looking through them at the opposite end. Tunnels also introduce the infants to the rotational schema, which we will get into next.



*Figure 3 Isla peeks through a before deciding to crawl through*

**Rotation** is turning, twisting or rolling oneself or objects in the environment around. You can extend learning by talking to them about different shapes in the environment and encourage ball or spinning games. Even you the adult playing games where you flip and spin your child. This also promotes working on balance.



*Figure 4 Calvin uses the lazy Susan for a creative experience to introduce rotation*





Figure 5 Examples of the lazy Susan creative artwork



Figure 6 Stella watches the golf ball as it rolls around the container

Introducing rotation can be done through body movements, creative experiences and engaging with different types of objects. With one of our creative experiences, we introduced a lazy Susan, covered it with paper, and provided markers to the infants to hold on the paper while the lazy Susan spun in circles. This allows the infants to see the outcome of their actions. We also provided the infants with golf balls, paper, paint and a container, in which they created a cause and effect reaction to make the golf balls roll and mark their paper with lines as the golf balls rotated around the container.

**Trajectory** is moving in or representing straight lines, arcs or curves. when the infants start displaying trajectory skills new language is introduced such as.... over and under and we provided a wide range of different material that can be lined up or thrown, which supports concepts of space, distance and speed.

When we allow the infants to throw balls this enhances their gross motor movements, but also introduces them to trajectory experiences with appropriate materials.



Figure 7 George and Tami engage in throwing a ball.



Figure 8 George getting ready to throw the ball

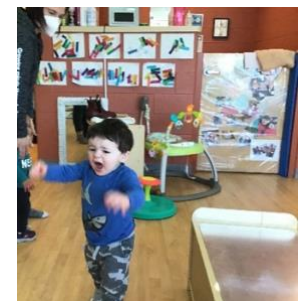


Figure 9 George throws the ball

**Transforming** is when we see transforming we introduce materials like playdough to explore change in shape, colour, consistency etc. Through transforming, the infants learn how to use tools safely and effectively, they are introduced to the process of these changes.



*Figure 10 Stella manipulating the playdough to transform it into something else.*



*Figure 11 Skittles bleed their colours to show a rainbow*

**Transporting** is when the infants may carry an object or carry them from one place to another. We introduced this when moving wheeled toys around, your child is learning about direction and how to maneuver around furniture and equipment. We also see this when they are filling up bags and boxes, as they learn about capacity, shape and size.



*Figure 12 Cam pushing the car around the room in a way to transport himself to different areas*



*Figure 43 Isla pushing the bike and taking her book to a different spot on the playground*

Within our observations, we are also aware that there are six types of play important to development. In the infant room, we tend to notice only four types of play.

**Unoccupied play** is considered the most basic type of play. The infant is not engaged in play. You may notice that your infant or toddler creatively moves their body with no purpose other than it feels good and interesting.



*Figure 14 Annabella is showing us unoccupied play*

**Independent or solitary play** is when your infant plays alone, with little to no reference to what other children or adults are doing.



*Figure 5 Isla playing independently in the sandbox*

**Onlooker play**, the infant observes the play of others, while not actually playing themselves. This stage of play is inactive, but still significant, as it is the first step in learning how to play with others.



*Figure 16 Cam looks on as George puts the balls into the muffin tins*

**Parallel play** is the most common play we start to see in the infant room as the infants start to change into toddlers. In this type of play, they may use the same toys; they tend to play beside, rather than with, other children.



*Figure 17 Cam and Calvin demonstrate parallel play as they explore the same sensory bucket*



**Associative play** is when children start to play with others, but their play is not organized and they do not work toward a common goal. For example, building a tower using blocks.

**Cooperative play** is when you start to see the beginning of teamwork. Children play with others for a common purpose. An example of this would be building a fort or train track. This can be observed when children reach the ages of 3.5 years and older.

In our attempts to understand play the educators watched a webinar called The Honeycomb Hypothesis a Fresh Perspective on how Infants, Toddlers and Two Learn. The honeycomb hypothesis uses the analogy of a honeybee to help explain the learning going on in infants and toddlers. In the chart below, it shows the progression of play from 18 months to 4 years of age. As children grow, they are able to stay at an activity longer to collect more information as they explore. To quote Sandra Duncan, "The reality is educators really do not know what is happening inside children's brains because we cannot see the schemas forming or taking place. We can only observe their visible actions, or patterns of play.

We reached out to a couple of child development experts to help answer our questions, but with no luck. Therefore, we got in contact with Katie Bauer who is a play therapist to answer our questions.

1. What does play teach us? Play can teach us a lot about children, from where they're at in their physical or social development (are they playing parallel to other children, beginning to interact with each other, working together on a task? Does their play involve gross motor or fine motor skills that are just emerging?), to what activities they enjoy most (this can often be a type of activity they will turn out to enjoy later in life!), to what they may be processing in their inner worlds. In play therapy specifically, we watch for what we call play "themes". These may be emotions that we observe in their play (either expressed by them directly or expressed indirectly through toy characters), or more complex themes like grief/loss, friendship/loyalty, conflict/aggression. In the context of therapy with children, play is THE most valuable resource for showing us what is happening with a child's behavior, and it's also THE most valuable resource for healing.
2. What types of play are there? There are many ways of classifying types of play, but one of the most basic lists that I've come across is as follows: unoccupied play(0-3 months), solitary play(0-2years), spectator/onlooker play (2 years), parallel play (2+years), associate play (3-4 years), and cooperative play (4+years). You could also classify play as "constructive". Building towers, taping cardboard together into shapes, using toothpicks and marshmallows to create something. "Sensory", everything is sensory, really, but ECE's and people working with young children know the importance of kids being exposed to all sorts of sensory-rich experiences! These experiences cause actual observable growth in the sensory parts of the brain. "Social", anything with two or more children working together.
3. Where can we play? We often think of specific spaces to play, like outdoors, indoors, sand play, water play, sensory play, constructive play, etc., but it is a fun exercise to start viewing pretty much everything children do as play. Imagining a pretend story, for example, creating a craft, and singing silly songs. All of these behaviours are playful and social in nature. In this way, especially when it comes to our imaginations, we can play anywhere! Fun fact, too, is that

mirror neurons in our brains actually allow us to experience to a certain extent what someone else is doing-when we watch someone else doing actions, playing a musical instrument, etc., we are taking that in and growing our brains as well. Therefore, in some ways, play does not always look active, but we know children's' brains are constantly growing.

### Phase 3: Concluding the Project

This project is never going to be complete; as we know children are always learning and as they grow, their play changes and becomes purposeful and cooperative within their group of peers. We however, decided to end this project because we have a group of children moving up to the toddler room and are going to be getting some new infants.

We ended our project by taking the infants to Thermaine Park to observe their actions in a different environment and noticed that their play is the same when in the classroom.



*Figure 19 Cam is demonstrating solitary play under the climber as his peers play on the slide*



*Figure 6 Calvin plays independently with a ball while his peers explore the playground equipment*



*Figure 21 George and Jen (educator) play cooperatively as they slide down the slide together*



*Figure 7 Calvin is showing he likes being enclosed when swinging on the swing*



*Figure 23 George is taking a risk as he goes down the slide headfirst*

## Teacher Reflections

This project was very interesting and a different take on what have done in the past. Although, we take the time to observe infants daily in what they are doing and how they are interacting with objects, peers and educators. The question is, the time really being taken on how they are learning. Which then goes into a deeper thought process of how the brain works and deciding what we learn as infants stays with us and matures as we get older or if the brain decides to drop the information because it is not needed. In doing this project, it was a fresh perspective on our daily observations and really looking at the play of how the infants learn.

Jennifer Silva R-ECE

Co-learning helps with our own understanding of what the infants do and a deeper look into why they do it. Preparing specific experiences to observe all the types of play took some deeper thinking and some team collaboration. We observed a lot of repetition and to adults that can seem boring after a while but when you try to change your perspective and see things through the eyes of a child, you notice little adjustments being made in what they do and all the reasons they might be doing it. Watching an idea bloom or seeing the success on a little face makes you remember our world is awesome and there is so much out there to continue to make us wonder, no matter what age we are! Let's try not to get in their way.

Tami Sutton, RECE



Watching the excitement on the infant's faces when we plan special activities and projects is such a joy to see. When we foster ways for the infants to explore risk taking, it allows them to be more confident in their personal skills. At times, they need some extra encouragement/support to gain from new experiences while other times they do an activity with ease and confidence. Observing the different levels of play in each child is truly remarkable. At our last field trip to the park, the infants displayed different skill levels. Noticing them gain new skills in the short time while we were there was such a great gift.

Connie Cunningham RECE

The significance of play can never be understated. From early stages, we can observe how the different aspects of play will play a part in overall learning and development of personal skills. Playing with the children can be so rewarding as an educator as you see the development stages come to life. You can never take away the fun and enjoyment I get in joining in with the children as they explore and experience new situations.

Judy Hackbart RECE