



Introduction

Children, after all, are not just adults-in-the-making. They are people whose current needs and rights and experiences must be taken seriously.

—Alfie Kohn, *Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community*

An Invitation

This book honors and supports the work you—current and future teachers—do, supporting the learning, development, and well-being of children from birth to age 3. With you, we celebrate a passion for the amazing capabilities of children in their first three years of life.

The purpose of this book is to describe and discuss *play materials* (that is, toys and other resources) as the “right stuff” for promoting and supporting learning, development, and a positive sense of well-being through play with very young children. This book is an invitation to think more intentionally about the play materials you select and use for your indoor and outdoor environments and to reflect more deeply on how meaningful and appropriate they are for the individuals in your setting as well as for the group as a whole (NAEYC 2020). Use the ideas in this book to stimulate your own thinking about new ways to see and use familiar, time-honored toys (e.g., balls and dolls) along with newer play materials (e.g., yoga cards and Magna-Tiles).

Reflecting on your role as teacher is also important. You may find it natural and easy to engage fully in play, playful interactions, and meaningful conversations with very young children; for others, this might be more of a struggle. This is especially true if you work with children who are not yet talking—at least not conventionally. In particular, you may find it uncomfortable to speak with a child who may not seem to be talking with you. For some, it may be because you are generally reserved; others may not yet fully understand the importance of these interactions and may worry about looking silly. For those teachers, the play materials and information in this book are meant to offer ways to help you break through the awkwardness or discomfort you may have working with very young children, feel more comfortable holding conversations with them, rediscover what fun it is to play, and feel safe being playful and (yes, sometimes) silly!

We also hope that the play materials in this book and how we present them inspire ways for infant and toddler teachers to communicate clearly to colleagues, families, and administrators about the importance of play and playful interactions and why you want or need certain play materials in your settings. We discuss how to use the materials to create environments and provide experiences that enable each and every child in your group to thrive, flourish, and achieve their full potential. In addition, we ask you to reflect on and consider very carefully the messages communicated by the materials themselves (NAEYC 2019a). Specifically, do the toys and resources demonstrate respect and awareness of the families, languages, cultures, experiences, and abilities and disabilities that are part of your community?

The content in this book reveals our underlying beliefs about the care and education of very young children—namely, infants and toddlers. In this book, our goals are to

- › Honor the work and play of children under the age of 3, representing it with respect in what we write, the words of others we share, and the images we show
- › Promote play and playful interactions as the major vehicles for scaffolding learning, supporting development, and fostering an overall healthy sense of well-being in very young children (NAEYC 2019b)
- › Support the United Nations’ recognition of play as a right for all children, including those under the age of 3 (United Nations 1989)
- › Acknowledge that children grow, learn, and develop at their own pace and experience their world in their own unique ways (NAEYC 2020)
- › Emphasize how although learning and developmental guidelines are useful to frame a broad understanding of what can be expected during the first 36 months of a child’s life, they should not be used to define any one individual child because children develop and learn “within specific social, cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts” (NAEYC 2020, 6)
- › Reflect a holistic (whole child) approach, recognizing the interconnectedness of growth, development, learning, and well-being across multiple domains (e.g., cognitive, social and emotional, physical)
- › Demonstrate respect for the beliefs, backgrounds, languages, and values of children within their families, communities, and cultures (NAEYC 2019a)
- › Invest in forming and nurturing strong, positive working relationships with families
- › Celebrate the role of those who care for and educate very young children by representing what they do as important and meaningful
- › Support a view that focuses on each child in the here and now (their *being*) as equally important—and sometimes even more important—than who they will be in the future (their *becoming*)

About this Book

This book is divided into four main parts. **Part One: Essential Questions** presents foundational information organized around the who, why, how, and what of using play materials to support very young children’s learning and development. Chapter 1 describes the changing child over the first three years, focusing on the strengths, needs, and motivations that influence their learning and development. We then talk about the reason play and play materials are important from a child’s rights perspective in Chapter 2. Next, we consider the important role you, the teacher, play in supporting learning and development in Chapter 3. The final chapter of Part One, Chapter 4, describes how we organize and present the play materials featured in Parts Two through Four of this book.

The remainder of the book’s core content is organized into the following three parts:

- › **Part Two: Cognitive Learning and Development**
- › **Part Three: Social and Emotional Learning and Development**
- › **Part Four: Physical Learning and Development**

Each part includes three chapters that describe suggested play materials and why they are useful for different aspects related to each domain.

All four parts conclude with a brief essay written by infant and toddler professionals (teachers and administrators of programs who serve children from birth to age 3), **In Your Words**.

In **Final Thoughts**, we summarize the key messages in the book and encourage you to consider the information and think about how you would expand on our ideas with further reflection.

We end the book with two appendices to support infant and toddler professionals in their everyday work. **Appendix A** features tables that highlight references and reminders for all teachers about the amazing capabilities of very young children and how they grow and learn over time. **Appendix B** provides a list of recommended children’s books for the development and learning domains presented in Parts Two through Four. It is critical to build a collection of children’s books that specifically targets the development, learning, and well-being of the children in your group and at the same time reflects their interests, abilities, languages, cultures, and families. This section includes classics, like *The Snowy Day* (by Ezra Jack Keats) and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (by Eric Carle), as well as more recent popular books, such as *Press Here* (by Hervé Tullet) and *Sweetest Kulu* (by Celina Kalluk, illustrated by Alexandria Neonakis). We also suggest books that feature diverse children and families, such as *Hands Can* (by Cheryl Willis Hudson, photographs by John-Francis Bourke) and *Mommy, Momma, and Me* (by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Carol Thompson), and support disabilities, such as *I Can, Can You?* (by Marjorie Pitzer) and *Special People, Special Ways* (by Arlene Maguire, illustrated by Sheila Bailey).

Throughout the book, we define how we use different terms and ideas. We do this to help make this material useful to all teachers, knowing each educator represents a different professional background and works in a different early childhood setting. By taking the space to share definitions and research-based notions of best practices, we hope to empower and inspire you in the work you do.