

Introduction



NICOLE HAS SEVENTEEN STUDENTS in her early childhood classroom. One of them is Manuel. Manuel is four years and nine months old. He and his family recently moved from Mexico to the United States. He knows a little English and is able to join English-speaking children as they play. He is a happy child with lots of enthusiasm and friends. Occasionally, he comes to the teacher with tears brimming in his eyes because he is unable to get the children to understand one of his play ideas. When Manuel and his parents came to fall parent night, Nicole found out that Manuel's parents speak very little English. Through another Spanish-speaking family, she learned that Manuel does much of the interpreting for his family during important communications with the apartment manager and the doctor.

Another of Nicole's students is Christopher. He is three and a half years old. He often comes to school looking dirty, wearing clothes that are either so big he could trip or so small his skin is exposed during the cold winter months. His family lives in a trailer home and is doing the best they can to make ends meet. Christopher talks about how his neighbors get into fights and then the police come. He is enamored with superhero television shows, and his backpack is full of plastic action figures. Christopher often gets into arguments with other children, and his first reaction is to raise his fist and yell. Other children are starting to avoid him.

Brooke is a four-year-old in Nicole's room. Brooke has trouble sitting for story time. She needs reminders to stay in her chair to finish snack or eat her lunch. During free play, Brooke rarely engages in lengthy play. Instead, Nicole noticed that Brooke runs

her fingers over toys in an interest area and then moves on to the next. Sometimes she stops in the housekeeping area long enough to get a purse to throw over her shoulder or get a doll to carry with her as she wanders the room. One day Nicole decided to see if she was exaggerating Brooke's inability to stay with an activity. To find out, she counted the number of areas Brooke moved to during free play. She found it was no exaggeration. Her data showed that Brooke visited seven areas in ten minutes.

Early childhood educators work with children like these every day. Many have used our first book, *Pathways to Play*, to help children develop play skills. Since it was published in 1992, we have considered a revision many times. The matter took on urgency when we noticed many new challenges facing our field. We wondered what we could add to our book that would support children and their continued passionate involvement in play. What could we add to the discussion in the early childhood field that would help providers articulate the importance of play and the learning taking place? We thought about some of the recent changes in early childhood and decided to write about how these changes influence play.

What has changed in the field of early childhood? Today, new issues challenge those who work with children. One example is a greater emphasis on getting children ready for school and academics. Many interpret this as a need for drill and direct instruction, yet we know children learn best through play and by interacting with others. There is a push for testing and benchmarks, and we know that standards can help us understand widely held developmental expectations for children as well as help us plan more intentionally. Another example is that a far greater number of children come to us because their families are fleeing turmoil in their home countries. We know these children need stability and a chance to make sense of the world. Children who speak languages other than English but live in a country where English is the primary language need opportunities to develop both their home languages and their new one. Also, more children come to us from communities and families in which they witness or experience violence or are touched by violence through the media. They need the caring support of others to heal and learn that the world can offer them love and kindness. Finally, more children with learning and behavioral challenges are included in our classrooms. They need learning opportunities that encourage them to work at the height of their abilities and to develop their potential. We know that children developing typically as well as those with special needs gain from interacting with others who have differing learning

styles and abilities. Special-needs children learn to play at a higher level when included with typically developing peers. Typically developing children learn to show empathy and offer assistance when needed. Whatever life challenges children experience, research tells us that play builds upon their strengths and creates a foundation for learning.

To help caregivers address these challenges, we have added a number of elements to this edition. The new elements include the following:

- A summary of several theories of play.
- A discussion of standards and how they can be addressed through play.
- Ideas about how to advocate for play with parents, administrators, and policymakers.
- A discussion of the factors that influence the typical development of play skills, including language, culture, temperament, and special needs.
- A continuous cycle of improvement that helps readers visualize the process used throughout this book.
- Information on authentic assessment, and ways to use observation and assessment in thinking about a child's play skills.
- A framework for writing goals that will help you take a child from where he is in play skill development to new, more complex skills.
- New and updated strategies for teaching play skills that correspond to the Play Checklist, including many ways to enhance literacy development.

We have outlined some new challenges, but a number of things have not changed since the first edition. Play skills remain vital to overall healthy development of all children. Play teaches children about symbols, solving conflict, and taking turns. Play is the perfect opportunity for children to address their needs and for adults to support their development. Through play, children learn the cognitive and interaction skills they need to become successful in later school settings and adulthood. Thoughtfully planned play experiences give children the opportunity to learn readiness skills. Play provides children with the opportunity to work out experiences that have confused or hurt them. Children take risks in play that allow them to learn new things. They try on a variety of roles and behaviors as they begin to learn who they are. They learn to control their emotions and behaviors as well as find out what they can't control about others. Play provides an opportunity for children to be creative, to be enthusiastic about their own ideas, and to get lost in thought. Play is fun.

About This Book

Chapter 1 introduces the most common theories of play—the place to start on the pathway to teaching play skills. This information will help you articulate why you include play in your busy schedule. A discussion of how standards can be reached through play helps you recognize the learning taking place so you can point it out to others. Ideas on how you can advocate for the importance of play are included. Chapter 2 reviews the definitions of the terms we use throughout the book. We outline how play helps a child begin to use symbols and interact with other children.

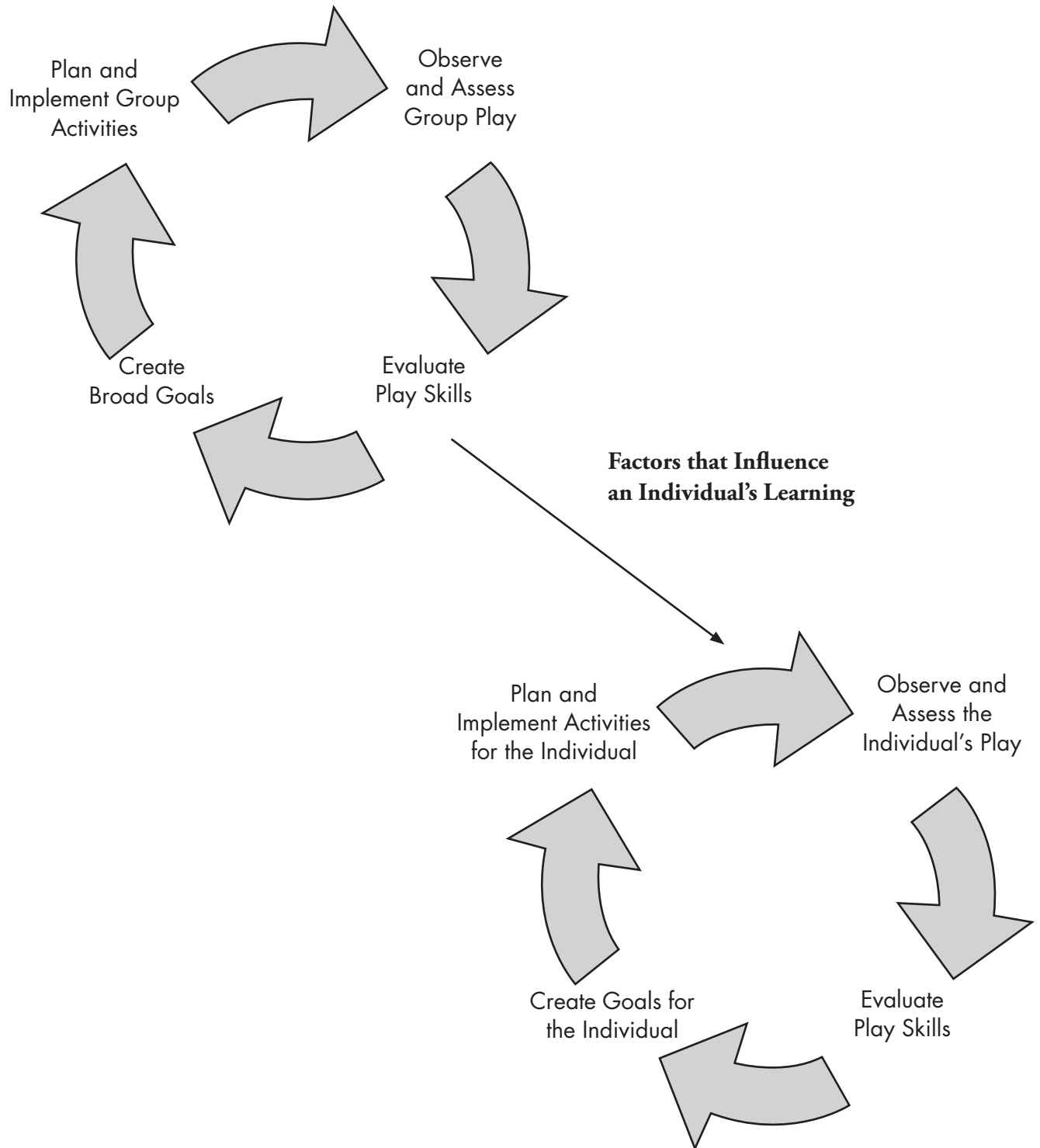
Chapter 3 gives suggestions for enhancing group play through time, materials, environment, and creating context for play. We discuss how you plan play activities to meet the needs of your group, build on their interests, and move them toward your goals. We describe how you continue to observe children's play and how to use the cycle of continuous improvement. Chapter 4 outlines factors that may influence the development of typical play skills, including culture, language, temperament, and special needs. This book suggests how to include children who are learning a second language and gives examples of how they add richness to our classrooms. A brief description of children with special needs helps you understand when to seek more information and/or the support of specialists. Knowing more about a child's abilities and possible adaptations helps you plan to meet each child's needs.

Chapter 5 looks at how to use authentic assessment to evaluate a child's play skills. An expanded version of the continuous cycle of improvement provides information about how to observe, write goals, and plan to work with a child who is having difficulty. Our Play Checklist, a tool that will help you pinpoint needed play skills, is introduced in this chapter. Chapter 6 describes a framework for writing goals that will guide your work with an individual child.

Chapter 7 shows you how to develop a lesson plan. We include questions to think about as you develop meaningful play experiences. Your role in play is an essential part of your plan. We look at when to become involved, how to become involved, and when to let the children play on their own. Chapter 8 is filled with suggestions for improving play skills. The suggestions correspond to each section of the checklist. Chapter 9 provides case studies to demonstrate how to put it all together and shows the results of putting the process into practice.

Throughout this book, a cycle of continuous improvement is presented; it includes observing and assessing, evaluating play skills, writing a goal, planning and implementing activities, and repeating the process. You will learn how to use the cycle to plan for a group of children as well as individual children.

Framework for the Book



Because we want to include both boys and girls, we have chosen to use the pronouns *he* and *she* in alternating chapters. We use the terms *teacher*, *caregiver*, *adult*, *early childhood educator*, and *provider* to describe the wide variety of people working with children. Typically, we refer to the caregiver as *she*, because most of those currently working in the field are female. Occasionally, we use *he* to acknowledge the important contribution of men and the role they have in early childhood settings.



We hope that learning more about play, how children develop play skills, and how to give them support as they learn to play with others will inspire you to keep learning more. This new edition reflects how much we continue to learn about play and how it enriches the lives of children. By increasing our skills of observation, planning, and evaluation, we can give children playful success.

Reflection Questions

1. What do you consider to be the greatest challenges facing the field of early childhood education today?
2. What is the greatest challenge you face in your early childhood setting?
3. What do you consider the greatest value of play?