



CALECSE

California Early Childhood
Special Education Network



Funded by the California Department of Education (CDE),
Special Education Division

Play-Based Assessments

March 4, 2026



CALECSE



California Early Childhood Special Education Network

Funded by the CDE

Implementation Leadership

Co-Executive Director, Dr. Scott Turner, East San Gabriel Valley SELPA

Co-Executive Director, Melanie Hertig, Irvine USD

Program Specialist (Exemplars), Carrie Rodrigues

Program Specialist (Northern California), Sara Castille

Program Specialist (Southern California), Laura Clarke



CaIECSE

California Early Childhood Special Education
Network *Funded by the CDE*

<https://www.calecse.org>



CaIECSE is a technical assistance project funded under the California Department of Education (CDE) that supports Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPAs), County Offices of Special Education (COEs), and other Agency Partners in the areas of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C to B Transitions, Preschool Assessment Practices, and Preschool Child Find by providing technical assistance, professional learning, and demonstration of tangible practices *that have been proven successful*.

The CaIECSE Network leverages collaboration amongst agencies, disseminates resources, highlights existing exemplar practices, and provides direct technical assistance to improve the capacity, knowledge, collaboration, and implementation of evidence-based practices across agencies throughout California.

The CaIECSE Network is committed to improving outcomes for children and their families by eliminating and addressing barriers to successful transition for California's youngest children with disabilities.

**Interested in joining a local
Community of Practice (CoP) for practitioners who
support children ages zero to five ?**

Find our full schedule of
regional CoPs at:

<https://www.calecse.org/news-resources/communities-of-practice>



**Communities
of Practice**

California Early Childhood
Special Education Network

Today's Presenters

Carrie Rodrigues, M.S., LEP, NCSP

CalECSE Program Specialist

Licensed Educational Psychologist

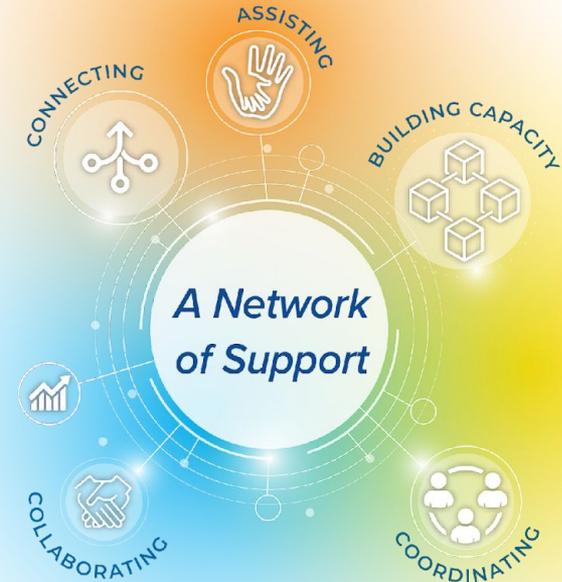
crodrigues@calecse.org

Linsey Sandrew, M.S. CCC-SLP

CalECSE Exemplar Lead, Assessment Practices

Speech and Language Pathologist

lsandrew@piedmont.k12.ca.us



What We Will Cover Today

- Understanding Importance of Play in Early Childhood
- Why Use Play-Based Assessments
- Different Types of Play-Based Assessments
 - Observational
 - Non-Standardized/Informal
 - Semi-Standardized and Standardized
- Conducting Play-Based Assessments
 - Making a Play Kit
 - Knowing What to Look For
 - Tips and Tricks
 - Data Collection
 - How to Incorporate it into Reports/Findings

THE POWER OF PLAY

Research-Based Rationale for Using
Play-Based Assessments in Early
Childhood Special Education Evaluations



Read and Reflect



“A child’s drive to play is biological in nature—like sleeping or eating.” —Stuart Brown, M.D.

Play is Essential to Early Childhood



Decades of research provides significant evidence of the benefits of play for children's learning and development (Alfieri et al. 2011).

A short video from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists outlines the importance of play in child development can be accessed here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_-1O_rBLPU

Share Your Thoughts



1. A take-away from the video
- or
2. A thought about why play-based assessment should be included in early childhood special education evaluations

What is Play?

1. Play is enjoyable
2. It requires active engagement in which the child is absorbed
3. Play is intrinsically motivated and self-driven by the child
4. Play is flexible and changing
5. Play is often imaginative and non-literal

Child Self-Determined Play is Highest Form
Children have the freedom and responsibility to be in charge of the meaning, direction, flow, and outcomes or learning goals associated with the play. Little adult involvement is required. This type of play is often described as “free play.”

Six Stages of Social Play

A video from the Pathways Foundation on the six stages of play can be accessed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWel4PemG54>

Source: Pathways Foundation 2025

<https://pathways.org/kids-learn-play-6-stages-play-development>

6 Stages of Play

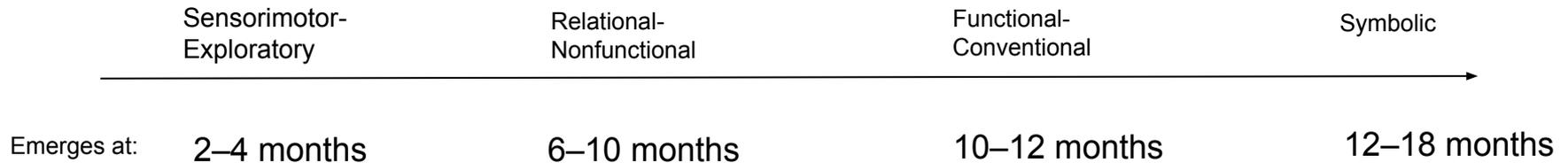
As a child grows they go through different stages of play development.

0-3 Months	Unoccupied Play	When baby is making movements with their arms, legs, hands, feet, etc. They are learning about and discovering how their body moves.	
0-2 Years	Solitary Play	When a child plays alone and are not interested in playing with others quite yet.	
2 Years	Spectator / Onlooker Behavior	When a child watches and observes other children playing but will not play with them.	
2+ Years	Parallel Play	When a child plays alongside or near to others but does not play with them.	
3-4 Years	Associate Play	When a child starts to interact with others during play, but there is not much cooperation required. <i>Ex: Kids playing on the playground, but doing different things.</i>	
4+ Years	Cooperative Play	When a child plays with others and has interest in both the activity and other children involved in playing.	

From Sensorimotor to Symbolic Play



Research has shown that symbolic play and early language development are closely correlated, with similarities in timing, content, and structure.



A no-cost, downloadable Stages of Play assessment tool from the website The Informed SLP is available at this link: https://tislp-bucket-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/Stagesof_Play_Assessment_ab53ba385b.pdf

Object Play Framework—Four Stages



Stage	Typically emerging at age	Description
Sensorimotor—Exploratory	2–4 months	Physical manipulation and inspection of objects: grasping, licking, banging, rubbing
Relational—Nonfunctional	6–10 months	Relating objects to one another in a manner that does not account for social or typical use of objects: stacking, nesting, bumping objects together
Functional—Conventional	10–12 months	Using objects in play in manners consistent with their social-conventional typical use: stirring a spoon in a bowl, pushing a toy car, kissing a teddy bear
Symbolic	12–18 months	The child plays out actions that are out of context in setting and for themselves, and pretend objects are something else

Source: Casby 2003

Object Play Framework—Four Stages



Categories of Symbolic Play

	Agent	Instrument	Scheme
	Who is doing the action?	What objects are being used in what way?	What is being acted out?
Stage 1	Child to self	Realistic Object	Single play act
Stage 2	Child performs action to a toy (feed a doll)	Substitute Object	Multiple play acts
Stage 3	Figurine play—adds animacy to toys/objects	Imaginary Object	Complex/planned

Source: Casby 2003

Read and Reflect

***“Young children learn best through play;
assessment methods should match how they
naturally express skills and needs.”***

**—National Association for the Education of
Young Children (NAEYC)**



Why Use Play-Based Assessments?



- Rapport building, engaging, and less stressful for child
- Encourages participation from parent/caregiver
- Culturally responsive and reflects each child's unique communication and learning style
- Standardized assessments might not work with young children
- Holistic & Naturalistic:
 - Provides a full view of cognitive, language, motor, and social-emotional domains
- Developmentally Appropriate:
 - Aligns with how young children learn and communicate
 - Encourages authentic, spontaneous behavior

Research and Literature Supporting Play-Based Assessments



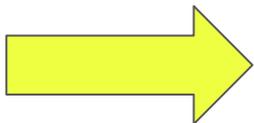
- Play has been shown as a developmentally appropriate assessment. (NAEYC 2020)
- Play-based observation is essential to capture skills missed by standardized tools. (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett 2005)
- Dynamic assessment during play reveals potential learning abilities beyond static scores. (Lidz 2002)
- Play provides a window into children's conceptual understanding, especially in the preoperational stage. (Piaget 1962)
- Play-based assessments helps assess communication in non-testable children and is critical for dual-language learners. (Greenspan & Wieder 1997)

1. Provides rich, qualitative data for Individual Education Program (IEP) eligibility determination
2. Meets the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA's) requirement for multiple sources and environments
3. Supports culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and neurodivergent-affirming practice

“Assessments must be tailored to the child’s mode of communication”—
IDEA (2004), 34 CFR § 300.304

Types of Play-Based Assessments

01	Observational	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Using a rating scale or checklist to observe a child in naturalistic play to obtain assessment information• Taking qualitative observations during play
02	Interactive Non-Standardized	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Child presented with play opportunities with examiner• Examiner collects information during play with child
03	Semi-Standardized/ Standardized	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Using a semi-standardized or standardized measure that has a play component to it and results in scores• Examples: Preschool Language Scales (PLS-5), Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS-2)



Observational Play-Based Assessments



- Observe child's play in authentic/natural setting (e.g., preschool/outdoor play)
- Ideally non-adult supported, true child-directed free play
- Narrative observations in assessment reports. See sample here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FR9RKbrgyOM2zxoU6Zng06NiGg9nf0QFegutOmhb-8/edit?usp=sharing>)
and/or
- Use play-based observation to complete a developmental assessment like the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), include that data in assessment report

Semi-Standardized, Standardized Play-Based or Partially Play-Based Assessments

Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule, 2nd Edition (ADOS-2)

Age range 12 months to Adulthood
2012

Four Modules, plus Toddler Module

Assessor presents various activities (e.g., Free Play, Response to Name, Response to Joint Attention)

Overall Autism, Autism Spectrum or Non-Spectrum Classification Given

- Assessor Scores in Language and Communication, Reciprocal Social Interaction, Play, Stereotyped & Restricted Interests, Abnormal Behaviors

Must be highly trained; snapshot in time; girls can be missed; difficult to administer/score.



Preschool Language Scales, 5th Edition (PLS-5)

Age range Birth–7:11
2011

Partially play based.

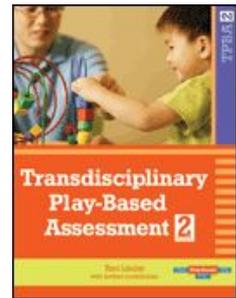
Has pragmatic-focused elements.



Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment, 2nd Edition (TPBA-2)

Age range 0–6
2008

Requires a multi-disciplinary team and is complex to score. Last updated in 2008—scoring does not align with revised milestones.



Interactive Play-Based Assessments

A Room Used for Play-based Assessment of Children Suspected of Having Disabilities



Source: GAO. | GAO-19-348

Who Can Use Play-Based Assessments?



1. **School Psychologists:** to assess all developmental areas through play; to hone in on social communication, intense interests and repetitive behaviors, and play skills when evaluating for Autism eligibility; to evaluate children's overall development compared to milestone markers for Larry P cases and multilingual students when standardized assessments might not be appropriate.
2. **Early Childhood Special Educators:** to assess all developmental areas through play for goal development, to hone in on preacademic and social/ skills through play.
3. **Speech Pathologists:** to assess communication; obtain language samples; evaluate pragmatics in a naturalistic setting; for goal development.
4. **Occupational Therapists/Physical Therapists:** to evaluate motor skills in a naturalistic manner and develop goals.

But what does this look like?

Giving the child an opportunity to play with toys...

To initiate play with you and/or their caregiver....

Then to try to engage them and see how they respond....

To observe their behavior, language, play, problem solving, social communication, developmental milestone markers, and signs of neurodivergent development.

A video from CalECSE discussing play-based assessment:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loj0tWEJgrY>

Getting Started: Must Know Neurotypical Development to Assess Play

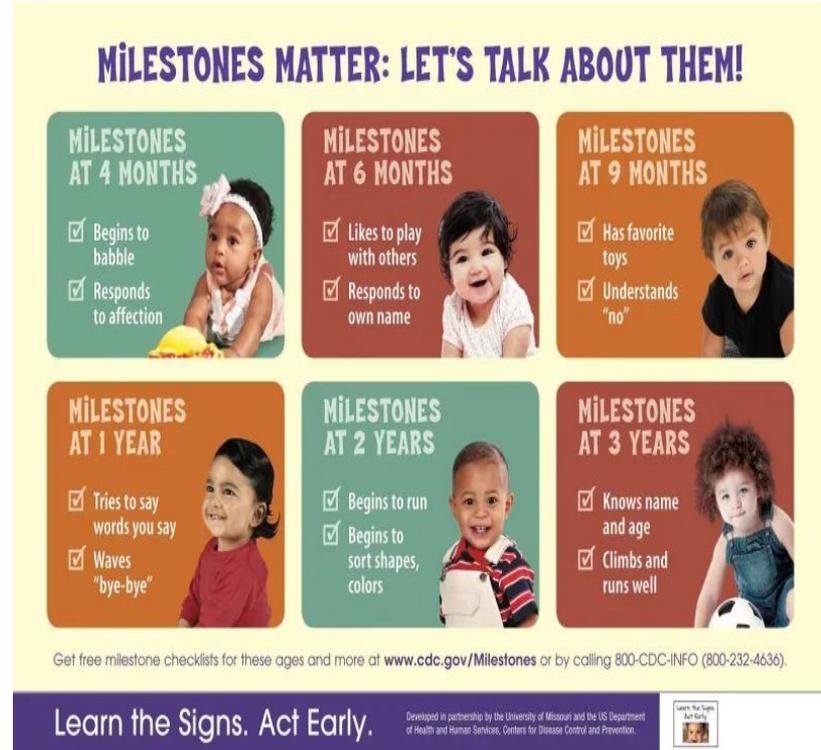
Center for Disease Control (CDC) Developmental Milestones Checklist available at:
https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/FULL-LIST-CDC_LTS_AE-Checklists2021_Eng_FNL2_508.pdf

Milestones were updated and revised in February 2022

Use CalECSE's Play-Based Observational Notes form to track potentially neurotypical and neurodivergent social communication and play:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dFLCBgAlfkNC4ITWjzStFsigiJaYMxkF/view>

Use CalECSE's Developmental Skills Checklist:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OId_VYCrXtvpSjxnFaeFDOjKfLPDB_Wj/view?usp=sharing

Source: CDC 2025



MILESTONES MATTER: LET'S TALK ABOUT THEM!

MILESTONES AT 4 MONTHS <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Begins to babble<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Responds to affection 	MILESTONES AT 6 MONTHS <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Likes to play with others<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Responds to own name 	MILESTONES AT 9 MONTHS <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Has favorite toys<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Understands "no" 
MILESTONES AT 1 YEAR <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tries to say words you say<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Waves "bye-bye" 	MILESTONES AT 2 YEARS <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Begins to run<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Begins to sort shapes, colors 	MILESTONES AT 3 YEARS <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Knows name and age<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Climbs and runs well 

Get free milestone checklists for these ages and more at www.cdc.gov/Milestones or by calling 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636).

Learn the Signs. Act Early. Developed in partnership by the University of Missouri and the US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



Speech & Language Milestones

7-12 months

- Babbles longer strings of sounds such as mimi upup babababa.
- Says **1 or 2 words around first birthday**. Such as hi, dog, dada, mama, or uh-oh.



1-2 years

- Use many new words.
- Puts **2 words together**, such as "More apple." "No bed", and "Mommy book".



2-3 years

- Follows 2-part directions such as "Get the spoon and put it on the table."
- Puts **3 words together to talk about and ask for things**.



Source: American
Speech-Language-Hearing
Association (ASHA) 2025

3-4 years

- Puts **4 words together**.
- Talks about what happened during the day.



4-5 years

- Follows longer directions such as "Get the box of crayons, find some paper, and pick out three colors."
- Tells a **short story**.



Students with Visual Impairments (VI) or who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (DHH)



Play-based assessments with students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing or Visually Impaired should be conducted by a specialist's knowledge about how these disabilities impact a child's development and play (e.g., a Teacher of DHH or Teacher of Students with VI).

State Bill 210 language milestones (ages zero to five) developed for Deaf or Hard of Hearing students are available at:

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ss/dh/sb210langmilestones.asp>

When Do Skills Typically Come In for Infants/Toddlers?

**By 9
months**

- Responds to name
- Range of facial expressions
- Smiles or laughs during games like Peek-a-Boo
- Joint attention

**By 15
months**

- Copies actions of other children
- Shows items to you
- Points to ask for something
- Looks at item when you name it
- Stacks two blocks

Be on the lookout for the absence of these skills

**By 18
months**

- Points to show you something of interest
- Follows 1-step directions
- Looks at a few pages in a book with you
- Copies you (e.g., imitates sweeping)

Neurotypical Development by Age Two

Play/Social-Emotional:

- Onlooker play moves into Parallel Play
- Notices when others are upset

Speech and Language:

- Combines two words (e.g., “More milk.”)
- Points to several body parts when named. Access video sample of this here: <https://youtu.be/HgORKBH2-uc>
- Begins to use nonverbal gestures besides pointing and waving (e.g., nodding, blowing kisses). Access video sample of this here: <https://youtu.be/5zrOdEddcT8>

Cognitive

- Holds something in one hand while using the other hand; for example, holding a container and taking the lid off

2 Years - Tries to use switches, knobs, or buttons on a toy



Source: CDC 2025 ;

ASHA 2025

Neurotypical Development by Age Three

Socio-Emotional/Play

- Notices other children and joins them in play
- Parallel play should be moving into associative play. Access video sample of this here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3O7LI3NKq4&t=5s>

Speech and Language

- Talks in a conversation with at least two back-and-forth exchanges. Access video sample of this here:
- Says what action is happening in a picture or book when asked, like “running,” “eating,” or “playing.” Access video sample of this here:

<https://youtu.be/hlMxvZ4K6vA>

Cognitive

- Draws a circle when you show them

3 Years - Strings items together, like large beads or macaroni



Sources: CDC 2025

ASHA 2025

Neurotypical Development by Age Four

Social-Emotional/Play

- Pretends to be something else during play (teacher, superhero).
Access video sample of this here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLTgWGGBAqo>
- Asks to go play with children if none are around, like “Can I play with Alex?”
- Comforts others who are hurt or sad, like hugging a crying friend
- Likes to be a “helper”
- Cooperative play with peers

Language

- Says sentences with four or more words. Access video sample of this here: <https://youtu.be/3J8tGSlybC4>
- Talks about at least one thing that happened during their day, like “I played soccer.”
- Answers simple questions like “What is a coat for?” or “What is a crayon for?” Access video sample of this here:
https://youtu.be/is_ZipdZDnM

4 Years - Draws a person with three or more body parts



Sources: CDC 2025

ASHA 2025

Neurotypical Development by Age Five

Social-Emotional/Play

- Cooperative play with peers, including rule-following and turn-taking in games
- Sings, dances, or acts for you. Access sample video of this here: <https://youtu.be/05Xpy7N9I1M>

Language

- Keeps a conversation going with more than three back-and-forth exchanges. Access sample video of this here: <https://youtu.be/1qGgCOUu-cl>

Cognitive

- Count to 10
- Names some numbers between one and five when you point to them
- Writes some letters in their name
- Names some letters when you point to them
- Uses words about time, like “yesterday,” “tomorrow,” “morning,” or “night”: <https://youtu.be/h1m6TKwzWxs>



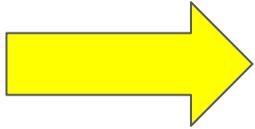
Sources: CDC 2025

ASHA 2025

Key Things to Watch For in Naturalistic Observations & Play-Based Assessments

A video demonstrating joint attention can be accessed here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ab4vLMMAbY>

A video demonstrating the difference between neurotypical and neurodivergent play can be accessed here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q2CzTJh7nl>



Limited joint attention and limited social engagement in play can be signs of Autism. Joint attention and social engagement should be constant and fluid in early childhood in most situations (exceptions can be cultural, trauma response).

What Else Are We Looking At?

- Which toys does the child choose?
- Does the child show you toys?
- Does the child try to involve you in their play?
- Do they show joint attention? Response to name?
- Do they share enjoyment (smiling at you or a caregiver?)
- Do they play with the toys the way intended?
- Do they incorporate your ideas?
- Do they imitate you?
- Do they point to show you things?
- Will they request more of a fun activity such as bubbles or balloons being blown up? How do they request?
- Will they engage in games like Peek-a-boo, rolling a ball back-and-forth?
- Do they seek help if needed?

Sample Video of Play-Based Assessment:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnw-3gOKir0>



Developmental Signs of Possible Autism

By six months

- Limited social smiles with caregivers
- Limited sustained eye contact

By nine months

- Limited to-and-fro sharing of smiles or sounds
- No response to name

By 12 months

- Limited or no babbling
- Limited or no gestures such as showing, or waving

By 16 months

- Few or no words (should have about 40 words)

By 24 months

- Few or no meaningful, two-word phrases (not including echolalia/gestalt language processing)

Article about Autistic play being authentic and meaningful:

<https://www.ctckids.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Autistic-Play-is-Authentic-Play.pdf>

Early Signs of Autism Video



Video may be accessed on YouTube here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtvP5A5OHpU>

Source: Kennedy Krieger Institute 2025

How Autism May Present in Boys' Play in Early Childhood

- More stereotypical restricted interests reported (e.g., fixation on dinosaurs, trains)
- More likely to show interest in parts of objects versus girls
- More repetitive motor movements (e.g., hand-flapping, pacing, jumping)
- More likely to engage in solitary play, have limited peer interactions
- Repetitive play more stereotypical of Autism (e.g., lining up objects, driving a car back and forth in front of eyes)
- Less likely to show pretend play



Source: Hendrickx 2015

Versus How Autism May Present in Girls' Play in Early Childhood

- Restricted interests more “socially acceptable” (e.g., “collections” and displaying/organizing toys, intense interest in animals/stuffies/character)
- Better sharing of interests—will converse with others
- Repetitive movements might look socially appropriate (twirling)
- Higher social motivation for friendships
- Higher nonverbal communication (more frequent eye contact, gesture use, social smiles)
- Better conversational skills (but speech can be overly verbose/formal, repetitive questioning, monopolizing conversations, frequent interruptions of others)
- May be called “bossy” by peers, difficulty sharing items
- Better pretend play/ability to imitate (repetitive play schemes that look imaginative)
- “Flitting” between peers on the playground
- Can appear “shy” or to suffer from anxiety



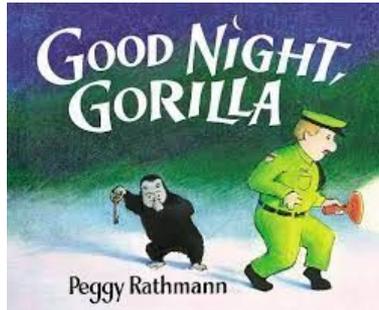
Source: Hendrickx, 2015

Getting Started: Making a Play Kit

- Use age-appropriate toys to elicit play, social communication, language, problem solving
- Typical Play Kit:
 - Free Play: Cause & Effect Toy, Blocks, Cars
 - Pretend play: Baby doll, phone, animals, or fake food/cups/plate
 - Joint attention: Bubbles, Jack-in-Box, or Balloons
 - Interactive Game: Blanket or Ball
 - Language Sample: Wordless book
 - Sensory Toy/Playdough
 - Block Puzzle



Preschool Play Kit...



Play-Based Assessment: Setting Up the Room

- Send the caregiver an email or have a phone call ahead of time to let them know what you will be doing and how involved you want them to be.
- Provide a seat for the parent or caregiver.
- Turn off computers, hide cell phones/lpads, or lower your screen if possible.
- Just put a few toys out to start: a couple on the table and a couple on the floor
- Put out a mix of different types of toys:
 - concrete tasks (simple block puzzle)
 - cause/effect
 - figurines
- Child Led. Follow their lead. Be silent to allow them a chance to explore and initiate



Possible Sequence for Play-Based Assessment

Link to possible play sequence can be found here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nMHcmmziQ_J7JWmuOkq9f-3-HYhJtJpj/view

- ★ This is an assessment to see what the child *naturally* initiates and responds to—you should not be working hard to engage.



- ★ *Wait time. Pause. Silence.* Follow the Child's Lead. Watch and allow for awkward pauses—that is where you will get the good information.

Why Should Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) Use Play-Based Assessments?



SLPs often assess children before other specialists, so it is important to become familiar with developmental milestones in other areas, including play. This is best recognized through holistic observation rather than standardized testing.

This is your time to collect a language sample, when the child is relaxed and using spontaneous language

Standardized testing does not always capture all aspects of a child's language, nor does not always elicit the targeted skill

What can be learned about language from Play-Based Assessments?

- For what purposes the child uses language
- How the child uses language and communication to problem-solve
- How the child uses gesture or other nonverbal communication strategies
- How intelligible the child's spontaneous speech and language are—does it disintegrate with more complex utterances?
- Level of receptive language
- Information regarding the child's social responsiveness and how the child initiates social interactions
- Expressive language—syntax and morphology
- Whether the child's language indicates a gestalt language learning style

Tips for Taking Language Samples

- Elicit a language sample by:
 - Putting out interactive toys
 - Looking at a wordless book
 - Allow the child to play with their parent/caregiver
- Record and transcribe later
- Silence is golden
- Avoid asking questions, make comments instead
- Avoid cause/effect toys that do not have an element of interaction

Collecting Data: Decide What Works Best for the Referral Reason



- Take notes
- Record the session (with written caregiver permission)
- Use CalECSE's Play-Based Observational Notes form to track potentially neurotypical and neurodivergent social communication and play:
https://www.calecse.org/uploads/blogs/files/1714089055_Assessment%20Practices%20-%20Play-Based%20Assessment%20Observational%20Notes.pdf
- Use CalECSE's Developmental Skills Checklist:
[https://www.calecse.org/uploads/blogs/files/1755552344_Play-Based%20Assessment%20Observed%20Skill%20Checklist%20Ages%20Two%20to%20Five%20\(2\).pdf](https://www.calecse.org/uploads/blogs/files/1755552344_Play-Based%20Assessment%20Observed%20Skill%20Checklist%20Ages%20Two%20to%20Five%20(2).pdf)
- Use a Developmental Checklist like CDC's which can be accessed here:
https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/FULL-LIST-CDC_LTSAE-Checklists2021_Eng_FNL2_508.pdf
- Use ASHA's Communication Checklists:
<https://www.asha.org/public/developmental-milestones/communication-milestones/>
- Use the Informed SLP's Stages of Play Assessment Sheet:
https://tislp-bucket-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/Stagesof_Play_Assessment_ab53ba385b.pdf



Play-Based Assessment Observational Notes

Child's Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____
 Chronological Age: 34 months Examiner: C. Rodrigues
 Location of Assessment: Sped office Date: 2/1/2024
 Time: 8:30 a.m. Who Accompanied Child: Dad - John Smith

- 2 or 3 Free Play Toys (e.g., Cause and Effect, Cars, Blocks) Sensory Toy
 Press for Joint Attention (e.g., Bubbles, Balloons) Wordless Book for Language Sample
 Pretend Play (e.g., Baby Doll, Farm Animals, Toy Foods) Interactive Game (e.g., Peek a Boo)
 Other: _____ Other: _____

Neurotypical Behaviors with Typical Developmental Milestone Timeline Noted in Italics

Behavior (Circle those observed)	Notes
<u>Social Smile Directed at Others 2 months</u>	Constant smiles directed at others.
<u>Demonstrates Joint Attention 6-12 months</u>	frequent
<u>Sustained Eye Contact 6-12 months</u>	constant, fluid, used for social interaction
<u>Responds to Name When Called 9 months</u>	first press by examiner
<u>Uses Range of Facial Expressions 9 Months</u>	frequent shifts of facial exps - directed to bus
<u>Showing Items to Others in Room 12 months</u>	brings Dad cup to share, points to show dad ex.
<u>Pointing to Show Items 18 months</u>	points to show Elmo to ex + dad, points many items
<u>Following a Point 9-12 months</u>	follows examiner's point to babydoll. times to show
<u>Demonstrates Shared Enjoyment/Sustained Back and Forth Interactions 9-12 months</u>	sustained shared enjoyment with peek-a-boo
<u>Uses Nonverbal Gestures (nodding, shaking head, clapping) 9-15 months</u>	waves to characters on cause + effect toy. Shakes head "no" Points finger + wags it
<u>Seeks Attention From Others in Room (e.g., "Look at me," initiates conversation/play) 18 months</u>	vocalizes to seek attention "no" to express displeasure. Approaches Dad/ex often to gain attention
<u>Seeks to Engage Others in Play/Asks for Help 24-30 months</u>	Requests help with sign + vocalizing
<u>Demonstrates Pretend Play 4 years</u>	Pours milk for baby, covers baby with blanket, holds phone to ear
Describe Observed Use of Language/Communication:	Limited clear expressive lang. only a few clear words heard. mainly used nonverbals to communicate + vocalizations



CALECSE
 California Early Childhood
 Special Education Network

A sample of report write-up for this session's notes is linked here:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1goMPpovf6AP1gd_8YdT3qH2Qh-A-VpVxMS0cBWpvsQw/edit?tab=t.0

Including Play-Based Assessments in Reports and Conclusions

Play-based assessment blank chart that accompanies CalECSE Play-Based Assessment Observational Notes Form for reports can be accessed here:

<https://docs.google.com/document/u/4/d/1sVn9QnpzylyWhSZmWvRH58jB65dGZULAMrhgrZ18baY/copy>

Three samples of speech and language write-ups of play-based assessments for reports can be accessed here:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1o4q44qENi0Xmnz7f3RVvFNDpX_B-aIhNSBuu0FJkY-U/edit?usp=sharing

See sample of a narrative observation of play in an assessment report here:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FR9RKbrgbyOM2zxoU6Zng06NiGg9nf0QFegutOmhb-8/edit?usp=sharing>



Read and Reflect

**“Play is the
highest form of
research.”**

— *Albert Einstein*



References

Alfieri, Louis, Patricia J. Brooks, Naomi J. Aldrich, and Harriet R. Tenenbaum. 2011. "Does Discovery-Based Instruction Enhance Learning? A Meta-Analytic Review." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 103 (1): 1–18.

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). 2025. <https://www.asha.org/public/developmental-milestones/>

California Department of Education. *The Powerful Role of Play in Early Education*. Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2020. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/documents/powerfulroleofplay.pdf>.

Casby, M. (2003). Developmental Assessment of Play. *Communication Disorders Quarterly*, 24(4), 175-183.

Center for Disease Control (CDC). 2025. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/>

Center for Disease Control (CDC). 2025. <https://www.cdc.gov/autism/signs-symptoms>

Greenspan, Stanley I., and Serena Wieder. 1997. "Developmental Patterns and Outcomes in Infants and Children with Disorders in Relating and Communicating: A Chart Review of 200 Cases of Children with Autistic Spectrum Diagnoses." *Journal of Developmental and Learning Disorders* 1 (1): 87–142.

Hendrickx, Sarah. *Women and Girls on the Autism Spectrum*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015.

Informed SLP. 2025. https://tislp-bucket-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/Stagesof_Play_Assessment_ab53ba385b.pdf

Lidz, Carol S. 2002. *Early Childhood Assessment*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.



References, Continued

Meisels, Samuel J., and Sally Atkins-Burnett. *Developmental Screening in Early Childhood: A Guide*. 5th ed. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2005.

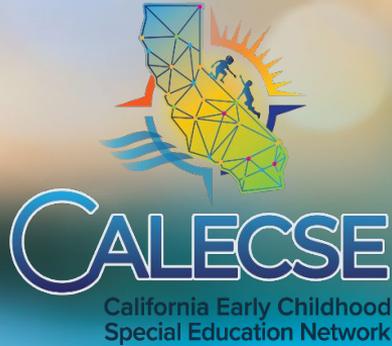
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). 2020. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice: A Position Statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap>.

Pathways Foundation. 2025. <https://pathways.org/kids-learn-play-6-stages-play-development>

Piaget, Jean. 1962. *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*. New York: Norton.

United States Department of Education. *Assistance to States for the Education of Children with Disabilities and the Early Intervention Program for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities, Final Rule*. 34 C.F.R. § 300.304 (2004).

Share Your Feedback for a Chance to Win CalECSE 2026 Symposium Registration



Please help us improve our practice and complete the zoom survey following this session.



After doing so, you will be entered into a raffle to win a free registration to **CalECSE's 4th Annual Symposium** to be held in Northern California October 20–21, 2026. Valued at over \$500.

Interested in joining a local Community of Practice (CoP) for practitioners who support children ages zero to five ?

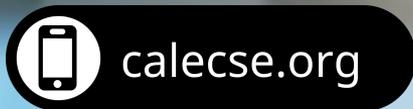
Find our full schedule of
regional CoPs at:

<https://www.calecse.org/news-resources/communities-of-practice>



Communities of Practice

California Early Childhood
Special Education Network



CALECSE

California Early Childhood
Special Education Network

Find our full line-up of no-cost trainings at:
<https://www.calecse.org/news-resources/calecse-training-calendar>

Follow us for updates on
training opportunities:



[@CalECSE](https://www.facebook.com/CalECSE)



[@Cal_ECSE](https://www.instagram.com/Cal_ECSE)



[@CalECSE](https://www.youtube.com/CalECSE)



[@CalECSE](https://www.linkedin.com/company/CalECSE)



[@Cal_ECSE](https://www.x.com/Cal_ECSE)