

ECED 530 97A - Carla Montie  
Assignment 5: Connect – Extend – Challenge

**Assignment 5: Lessons 9 & 10 ~ Connect – Extend – Challenge**  
**Creating Play Experiences and Environments That Support the Development of Social Skills**

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## **Introduction**

While learning about typical and atypical social development and some disorders, I realized that I would like to know more about how I can facilitate play experiences and environments that support social skill development in all children, and particularly in children with special needs or disabilities. An ecological approach focuses on building a nurturing, responsive, and inclusive environment and climate that promotes healthy development of all children. “The development of positive social skills is critical to the successful inclusion of children with disabilities in community-based settings” (Cook, Klein & Chen, 2019, p. 210). A strength-based approach recognizes that each child brings gifts. “Each child has histories, contexts, gifts, capabilities, and potential that can be honoured and nurtured with responsive and productive practices and environments” (Early Learning Framework, 2019, p. 25). Early childhood educators have an important role to support children with special needs or disabilities so they can play, interact socially, establish relationships with their peers, and feel a sense of belonging within the class community. “Inclusion entails recognition of our universal oneness and interdependence. Inclusion is recognizing that we are one even though we are not the same” (Asante, 2002, p.1). Play can be a powerful, motivating, and meaningful way for children to develop positive and productive social skills.

The inspiration for this reflection paper comes from a Grade 2 student at our school, named Kyla (pseudonym), who has a rare disorder caused by chromosomal abnormalities. This past school year, Kyla spent time in my Kindergarten classroom each day to gain additional play opportunities to support personal growth and development of social skills. Several aspects influence Kyla’s ability to actively participate in play, interact with peers, and engage in social behaviours. Kyla exhibits developmental delays in all areas of development, including conceptual (cognitive functioning), social (social/emotional) skills, and practical (adaptive) skills. Kyla has limited language and communication

skills, she is non-verbal, avoids eye contact, and has difficulty reading nonverbal cues. Kyla's lack of fine-motor and gross-motor skills impact her play choices and play behaviours. During playtime, Kyla shows limited joint attention and imitation of others. She does not engage in symbolic play and typically participates in repetitive play with the same objects. Children like Kyla, with special needs or disabilities, will need adult and peer assistance to participate in play and social endeavours. I think we did a good job of providing Kyla with play opportunities to encourage positive interactions and social experiences. However, new information I learned in lessons 9 and 10, have influenced my perspectives, moved me in new directions, and generated new questions and inquiries. Next school year Kyla will continue to spend time in my Kindergarten class, therefore I would like to review and reflect on past practices in order to make improvements for next year. The ultimate goal is that all my students can equally access age and context appropriate opportunities for health, happiness, well-being, and optimal development.

I will be using the process of Connect-Extend-Challenge to enhance my understanding of creating play experiences and environments that support the development of social skills for all children in my Kindergarten class; and especially for children, like Kyla, with special needs or disabilities. The organization of this paper will consist of: (1) connecting what I learned to previous knowledge and experience; (2) extending my learning by reflecting on how this knowledge has changed my way of thinking and caused me to move in new directions; and (3) challenging my understanding by addressing any issues, topics, or questions that continue to contest my pedagogy.

### **Connect**

Many educators consider social skills to be one of the most important developmental areas for children. "Social skills form a multidimensional construct" (Szumski, Smogorzewska & Karwowski, 2016) and as a result there are various definitions. However, social skills can be defined as competent

abilities and behaviours that facilitate interaction and communication with others (Szumski et al., 2016). In my Kindergarten class community, social skill development and positive peer interactions are something that I aspire to encourage and promote for all of my students. Therefore, I think it is important to review my current pedagogy; to connect, reflect, and re-evaluate practices in order to enhance my program.

I have always greatly valued the power of play in my Kindergarten classroom. Play can act as a platform to encourage social interactions and develop social skills. Play naturally has great potential to inspire connection, collaboration, cooperation, and inclusion, in a way that is engaging and motivating to children. The multifaceted and malleable nature of play allows for differentiation; the ability to transform, evolve, adapt and modify activities.

There is considerable literature on the importance of play in early childhood settings. Extant research has shown that play can be used for developmental learning and can positively influence children's development of social skills (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). In education systems all over the world, the value and benefits of play approaches have been acknowledged, explored, and endorsed in both research and educational contexts. In Canada, educational policies and curricula have been changing to acknowledge evidence-based practice promoting play as developmentally appropriate and necessary pedagogy (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Locally, there are several new mandates for play and play-based learning in early childhood settings. In British Columbia, some examples include The Play Today B.C. Handbook (2019), the B.C. Early Learning Framework (2019), and the B.C. Curriculum and Core Competencies (2019). The Play Today B.C. Handbook states: "The experiences of children's play have a profound impact on all areas of their growth and development" (2019, p.1). In addition, the B.C. Early Learning Framework states: "This framework values play as vital to children's learning,

growth, and meaning making” (2019, p. 27). My Kindergarten program highly values practices of play, and I regularly explore research and policy to inform, guide, and change my pedagogy.

In terms of creating play experiences and environments that support the development of social skills, I made several connections between what I already knew and what I revisited in lessons 9 and 10. The first connection I made is arranging play areas thoughtfully; and the second connection I made is establishing rules, boundaries, and guidelines from the beginning (Cook et al., 2019). In my Kindergarten classroom, I have established open play areas by providing larger spaces for cooperative play with building materials (big wooden blocks, Duplo, Mega Blocks, Connectors, etc.). I have carefully arranged small, cozy, private spaces to allow for quiet alone time (Quiet Corner, puzzle and book nook, listening station, etc.). A kitchen area is set up to promote imaginative and cooperative play. Various play materials and resources are made available to children and have effective storage places. Many imagination stimulators are available such as puppets and puppet theatre; dolls and dollhouse; dress-up (closet, mirror and area); car, truck and train table (mats, roads, tunnels, etc.); animals with a barn and farm terrain; dinosaurs; stuffed animals; as well as a variety of loose parts (natural and man-made). I utilize both inside and outside spaces to provide more choice and avoid crowding. Throughout the year, some toys take a break and are put away (into storage) if they are not compatible with the group or encourage too much noise, activity, or conflict (Cook et al., 2019). Careful, thoughtful, and flexible arrangements of the classroom space allow the environment to work as a ‘third teacher’ and support children to access play and social opportunities.

Over the years, I have learned that it is an important investment to establish rules, boundaries, and guidelines from the beginning of the school year. Some ideas that I connected to and already implement in my own classroom include keeping rules simple and concise, allowing children time to learn the rules by observation and experience, and using teachable moments to remind children and

reinforce rules. Rules in my classroom are meaningful and gentle. They celebrate kind behaviour such as respecting others; promoting voice, choice, and free-will; encouraging but (not forcing) sharing; using good manners; returning objects back to their place when done; asking permission to join in; honouring someone's desire to observe, sit out, or have quiet alone time (Cook et al., 2019). I find that this process provides children with structure, security, and stability to feel safe and take risks when engaging in play and social endeavours. Providing this support is even more important for children who lack social skills, have special needs, or disabilities.

### **Extend**

There were also several new ideas, approaches, and concepts that I learned from lessons 9 and 10 that extended and pushed my thinking in new directions. Some examples of this extension include using environmental structuring, using peers without disabilities as mediators of social skills, achieving a greater understanding of the development of social interaction skills through play, and facilitating play and social skill development in children with severe disabilities (Cook et al., 2019).

A new strategy I learned from lessons 9 and 10, and plan to use in future planning, is using environmental structuring (Cook et al., 2019). I will keep groups small during play activities so that I can help encourage and guide positive social interactions, but not disturb play. I will provide opportunities for children to learn how to use certain materials before expecting them to play in cooperative situations. I will carefully select social and cooperative materials and toys rather than isolating ones. I will plan opportunities that offer sufficient materials to encourage imitation and cooperation, or less - if the goal is to promote sharing. I will plan collaborative activities to practice cooperation and imitation skills. Structuring the environment in these ways, offered by Cook et al. (2019) will enhance interactions, lead to positive and productive play, and support the development of social skills.

Another strategy I learned is using peers without disabilities as mediators of social skills. “With peer-mediated strategies, coaching is provided to a peer to promote social interaction skills rather than having only adults prompt the child with disabilities” (Cook et al., 2019, p. 211). This year we used Kindergarten peers in my class to help interact with and model social skills to Kyla. However, these specific points will provide me with important factors to consider when selecting the right peers to act as mediators. I learned that it is important to select a child who consistently follows the teacher’s directions, demonstrates positive and appropriate interactional skills, attends school regularly, frequently plays with the same toys or engages in the same activities as the child who needs intervention, and has expressed interest in interacting with the target child (Cook et al., 2019). These guidelines offer assistance in selecting peer helpers for Kyla, and other children, in the future.

In addition, information in lessons 9 and 10 helped me achieve a greater understanding of the development levels of social play behaviour. Cook et al. (2019) discuss a variation of the classic work of Parten (1932) concerning six levels of social participation. Although Cook et al. (2019) point out that it is important to follow such constructs with caution, it does provide guidelines for observing and selecting appropriate intervention strategies. The stages of play development and social participation include: (1) unoccupied behaviour, solitary independent play, onlooker behaviour, parallel activity, associative play, and cooperative or organized play (Cook et al., 2019). Kyla demonstrates the first four stages of social play development, and is able to participate in parallel play activities. However, I have not observed her engage in associative play or cooperative play. Cook et al. (2019) suggested some specific strategies I can use to support Kyla, and other students, in the future. One strategy is to identify preferences for peers and toys in order to provide opportunities for imitation of play actions and turn taking. In addition, I can use peers without disabilities to act as initiators of social interactions, such as sharing. Furthermore, I can position Kyla, or other children with special needs or disabilities, centrally within the group to provide access to toys and peers. I also learned that it is important to

understand the normal progression of play development, as children with disabilities usually progress more slowly through the same stages of play and social participation. However, in order to provide optimal support or intervention; it is vital to carefully observe, examine, and understand specific differences and unique elements in each child's play behaviour (Cook et al., 2019).

It is essential that early education works to create a responsive and inclusive environment that facilitates play and social skill development for children with disabilities. I learned that there are some specific strategies that I can use to use to support children with special needs disabilities access play (Cook et al., 2019). Primarily, I must remember that children with disabilities are children first, and need play to learn, develop and grow. Secondly, I can work to individualize play experiences by modifying materials, resources, and environments. In addition, I can intervene by encouraging and supporting play when children are not able to initiate. As a class, we can discuss that all children have the ability to participate in play, although it may look and feel different for each of us. Furthermore, I can encourage additional opportunities for play experiences (play dates, playgroups, activities, etc.). When appropriate, I can use assistive technology to support play participation. These tactics (Cook et al., 2019) offer a strength-based approach that can be used to support, adapt, and modify play and social skill development for children based on their unique strengths, interests, and needs.

### **Challenge**

Some topics, issues and questions that continue to challenge my thinking and understanding of how I can help facilitate play experiences and environments that support social skill development for all children, and especially for children with special needs and disabilities include:

**Roles of Teachers and Adults:**

- What do I view my role to be, in helping children who need support playing, interacting with peers, or developing social skills?
- How do I support all my students' diverse needs? What specific skills and strategies do I have and what do I need to learn in order to support my students?
- How do I know when to take on a passive or more active role when supporting?

**Roles of Peers:**

- What do I view the role of peers to be in helping support, mediate and model play, peer interactions, and social skills?
- How will I find time to train and coach peers to help students in need? How will I devise a plan for peer training? What will this plan look like?

**Social Skill Teaching or Intervention Programs:**

- Can social skills be taught directly and explicitly to children? Could the class engage in large or small group direct instruction time to learn a specific social skills and then be given time to practice the skill through play?
- What specific social skills would I like to target? How will I target specific social skills?
- What would a whole group social skills intervention program look like? What adaptations or modifications could be made for children that need social skill support, have special needs, or disabilities?

**Social Skill Measurement (Formative and Summative Assessment):**

- How will social skills be measured? How will a child's social skill change (growth and development) be measured (assessed or gauged)?

- How do I know if social skill development is happening in my classroom? How do I know if social skill development strategies are working? What do I do if strategies are not working? How will I use this information to make changes to my plans?
- What about student self-assessment of social skills? How do I take student ideas and feelings into account for future learning and plans?

### **Play Opportunities:**

- How do I find enough time each day for play opportunities?
- How do I ensure that I am offering a diverse range of play activities to offer variety (such as; spontaneous play, free-choice/child directed play; collaborative play; teacher-directed play; playful learning, learning games, etc.)?
- What are some specific examples of social skill activities for each type of play?

### **Play and Social Skill Resources:**

- What other toys, materials, resources, and structures are needed to encourage play, peer interaction, and social development?
- What other community resources can I utilize to support students (community center, sports programs, nature camps, art classes, etc.)?

I have some more work to do to continue to explore these questions, and perhaps new questions, issues, and challenges will come up along the way. However, I feel confident that I have the skills and ability; intuition and experience to work through obstacles in order to make play experiences and environments and social interactions meaningful and authentic for each unique group of children and for each individual child.

## **Conclusion**

Information I learned in lessons 9 & 10 enhanced my understanding of how to provide all of my children with equal access to meaningful powerful play, positive social interactions, and effective social skill development. “Regardless of socio-economic status, geographic isolation, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, abilities and learning needs, and family structure and values, every child should be welcomed and empowered to pursue their gifts” (Early Learning Framework, 2019, p. 25). I found this exercise to be rewarding, and in the future, I plan to continue to engage in this Visible Thinking routine to provide ongoing insight and enhancement to the work in progress of my pedagogy. Reflective practices such as Connect-Extend-Challenge can help me continue to work towards incorporating approaches that are equitable, inclusive, and child-centered; focusing on the unique context of each child. As “[t]he goal of inclusion requires educators to consider creating physical spaces, routines, or approaches that will allow each child to participate, to think, and to discover in his or her unique ways” (Early Learning Framework, 2019, p. 25).

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