

Westminster School for Young Children

High-Quality Play-Based Instruction

Our Philosophy

At WSYC, we believe that children learn best in an environment that promotes and values PLAY. Play is critical in the development of cognitive skills, language and literacy, social skills, emotional skills, and physical abilities. High-quality play-based instruction is intentional, joyful, and rooted in strong relationships. Children learn through exploration, conversation, problem-solving, and meaningful experiences while teachers thoughtfully guide, observe, and extend learning.

What Does High-Quality Play Look Like?

Children are...

- ✓ Choosing materials independently
- ✓ Asking questions
- ✓ Solving problems
- ✓ Working with peers
- ✓ Creating and imagining
- ✓ Taking appropriate risks
- ✓ Talking more than the teacher
- ✓ Moving freely between learning experiences
- ✓ Revisiting ideas over multiple days
- ✓ Demonstrating joy and engagement

What Does the Teacher Do?

A play-based teacher is intentional.

They...

Design

- Create inviting learning environments
- Rotate materials based on children's interests
- Plan provocations that spark curiosity
- Ensure every center has a clear learning purpose

Observe

- Watch before jumping in
- Notice children's thinking
- Collect documentation
- Listen for opportunities to extend learning

Extend Learning

Instead of giving answers, teachers ask questions like:

- "What do you notice?"
- "I wonder why..."
- "How could we figure that out?"
- "Tell me about your idea."
- "What might happen if...?"

The goal is to stretch children's thinking—not control it.

The Three Types of Play

Free Play

Children choose what, how, and with whom they play.

Teacher role:

Observe, build relationships, and learn about children's interests.

Guided Play

Children maintain ownership while teachers intentionally extend learning.

Examples:

- Adding measuring tapes to the block center
- Introducing new vocabulary
- Asking questions that deepen thinking
- Encouraging collaboration
- Helping children investigate problems

This is where some of the richest learning occurs.

Teacher-Directed Learning

Teachers intentionally teach specific skills when appropriate.

Examples:

- Morning meeting
- Read-alouds
- Mini-lessons
- Small-group instruction

High-quality classrooms include all three—but guided play should be woven throughout the day.

High-quality play-based instruction isn't the absence of teaching. It is intentional teaching woven into children's curiosity, relationships, exploration, and joy.