Play Advocacy Toolkit

For Early Childhood Educators, Instructional Leaders, Families, Pediatricians, and coaches

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What this toolkit is for

This toolkit helps adults explain, protect, and strengthen play-based kindergarten. It centers whole-child development and includes targeted support for multilingual learners and children with disabilities. The tools are designed for real advocacy: transition meetings, principal conversations, registration events, coaching cycles, family handouts, and district planning.

Contents: core messages, preschool-to-kindergarten bridge questions, teacher advocacy language for administrators, equity one-pagers, instructional leader look-fors, peer coaching tools, a family flyer, and references.

1. Core advocacy messages and the research behind them

Use these messages in meetings, emails, handouts, board discussions, transition meetings, and family events.

Advocacy statement	Why it matters in practice	Research base
Play is how young children learn, not a break from learning.	Purposeful play supports social-emotional, cognitive, language, self-regulation, and executive function development. It gives children agency while allowing teachers to scaffold learning goals.	AAP (2018); NAEYC (1995)
Play-based kindergarten supports school readiness	Kindergarten should cultivate executive functioning, collaboration, problem solving,	AAP (2018); NAEYC (1995);

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Advocacy statement	Why it matters in practice	Research base
better than drill-heavy models.	persistence, creativity, and attention - skills children need to access later academics.	Teach Plus IL (2022)
Play can and should carry explicit literacy instruction.	Illinois emphasizes explicit and systematic instruction in foundational skills. In early childhood settings, that instruction can be embedded into oral language, read-alouds, writing, dramatic play, songs, rhymes, manipulatives, and small groups.	ISBE Literacy Plan (2024)
Play is especially important for multilingual learners.	Play creates low-stress opportunities for oracy, vocabulary growth, peer interaction, translanguaging, and identity-affirming language use. WIDA stresses responsive, sustaining environments and observation-based assessment.	WIDA (2023); ISBE Literacy Plan (2024)
Play strengthens inclusion for children with disabilities.	Inclusive play-based classrooms make it easier to embed IEP goals, support peer interaction, use co-teaching and push-in services, and maintain continuity from inclusive preschool into kindergarten.	Danniels & Pyle (2023); ISBE Literacy Plan (2024)
Play still requires evidence-based teaching.	Teachers should state learning goals, choose materials intentionally, ask open-ended questions, differentiate, observe closely, and document learning across literacy, math, and self-regulation.	Teach Plus IL (2022); ISBE Literacy Plan (2024)

2. Preschool-to-kindergarten bridge questions and fill-in forms

Designed for preschool teachers to use when sharing student strengths and explaining how purposeful play has supported literacy, math, language, inclusion, and self-regulation.

Questions preschool teachers can bring to transition conversations:

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- What does purposeful play look like in your kindergarten classrooms, and how much uninterrupted play time do children have daily?
- How are literacy goals, math goals, oral language goals, and social-emotional goals embedded into centers, small groups, and read-alouds?
- How are multilingual learners supported to use their full language repertoires, build oracy, and access instruction through culturally and linguistically sustaining practices?
- How are children with IEPs, developmental delays, or related service needs supported during play, whole group, and small group instruction?
- How are observations, work samples, and family input used alongside assessments to understand each child as a whole learner?
- What routines, materials, and adult roles help children enter play, persist in play, solve peer problems, and extend their ideas over time?
- How do preschool and kindergarten teams communicate about student interests, communication strengths, regulation needs, peer relationships, and successful supports?

Student growth snapshot: fill-in-the-blank statements

Area	Sentence stem	Date / example
Literacy / oracy	During purposeful play, this child used oral language to explain, negotiate, retell, label, question, or imagine by _____. One strength we saw often was _____.	_____
Foundational literacy	Through songs, rhymes, sound play, environmental print, read-aloud response, writing invitations, and/or small groups, this child showed growth in phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, writing, or decoding by _____.	_____
Math	In blocks, games, routines, measuring, sorting, counting, building, or dramatic play, this child showed growth in number sense, spatial reasoning, patterning, or problem solving by _____.	_____
Self-regulation	This child showed growth in attending, waiting, persisting, recovering from frustration, using language instead of behavior, or following routines by _____.	_____

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Area	Sentence stem	Date / example
Peer interaction	This child grew in entering play, sharing materials, negotiating roles, solving conflicts, or collaborating with peers by _____.	_____
Multilingual learner strengths	This child used their home language(s), English, and/or translanguaging to access play, communicate ideas, and build literacy by _____. A successful support was _____.	_____
Disability / support needs	This child participated most successfully when adults used the following supports during play and instruction: _____. Related services or embedded supports were effective when _____.	_____
Family knowledge	Important family priorities, interests, routines, cultural practices, or language information that should follow this child into kindergarten include _____.	_____

3. Statements teachers can use with administrators - with research support

"If we want better literacy outcomes later, we cannot sacrifice oral language, self-regulation, and background knowledge now."

Research support: The Illinois Comprehensive Literacy Plan identifies oracy, phonological awareness, word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing as interconnected literacy components, and emphasizes that young learners build language through social interaction, play, and meaningful dialogue.

"Developmentally appropriate practice and explicit instruction are not opposites."

Research support: Illinois defines explicit instruction as clear, active, feedback-rich teaching and systematic instruction as sequenced teaching of foundational skills. The same plan also stresses developmentally appropriate and meaningful contexts for literacy learning.

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"Multilingual learners need play-rich, language-rich environments, not English-only compliance spaces."

Research support: WIDA Early Years Essential Actions call for environments that invite and sustain multilingual children's language development, family partnership, culturally and linguistically sustaining curriculum, and observation-based assessment over time.

"Children with disabilities participate more fully when support is embedded into play, not separated from it."

Research support: Research on inclusive play-based kindergarten highlights child-centred, flexible teacher involvement, support for social interaction, one-on-one conversations, small-group support, active play partnering, and collaborative problem solving as ways teachers enact inclusion.

"We should evaluate play-based classrooms by what children are learning, saying, writing, building, solving, and regulating - not by how quiet they are."

Research support: Teach Plus Illinois describes guided play classrooms as places where teachers embed standards, state learning objectives, use observation and anecdotal notes, ask open-ended questions, scaffold and differentiate, while students explain their thinking and engage in extended conversations and hands-on learning.

4. Fast facts for multilingual learners and children with disabilities

Use this page when you need to explain why play-based kindergarten is an equity issue, not just a preference.

Multilingual learners

- Play gives multilingual children repeated, meaningful opportunities for oracy, vocabulary, turn-taking, storytelling, and academic language.
- WIDA emphasizes affirming children's identities, partnering with families, creating welcoming language

Children with disabilities

- Play-based classrooms create natural places to embed IEP goals, model language, scaffold peer entry, and support regulation without removing children from authentic learning.

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environments, and using observation-based assessment over time. • Illinois notes that oral language development in English and in home languages matters for English literacy development. • Play supports translanguaging and lets children use all of their linguistic resources to problem solve, enter peer play, and show what they know. • Play-based literacy can still be explicit: teachers can directly teach sounds, vocabulary, print concepts, writing, and language structures within meaningful contexts.	• Inclusive play-based kindergarten improves continuity for children moving from inclusive preschool into kindergarten. • Related service providers can push in during centers, dramatic play, block play, small groups, and routines to support communication, motor, and regulation goals. • Illinois stresses differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, observation, and support for learners with specialized needs across literacy development. • Play-based settings help adults notice strengths, barriers, interests, and successful supports that may be missed in more rigid, worksheet-driven settings.

5. Instructional leader and coach checklist: what to look for in purposeful, content-driven play

Look-for	Consist.	Emerging	Notes
Planning and design			
Learning goals or standards are embedded into play, centers, small groups, read-alouds, and routines.	☐	☐	_____
Play materials were chosen intentionally to support literacy, math, science, and/or social studies thinking.	☐	☐	_____
Children have uninterrupted time to sustain ideas, revisit play schemes, and deepen learning over time.	☐	☐	_____

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Look-for	Consist.	Emerging	Notes
Literacy through play			
Adults model and extend oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension with open-ended questions and rich conversation.	☐	☐	_____
Play invitations lean into the content theme while also encouraging speaking, reading, writing, interaction, and listening in every Center through guidance, practice, resources, and modeling.	☐	☐	
Children have access to meaningful print, writing tools, labels, books, charts, and opportunities to write in play.	☐	☐	_____
Foundational and Interdisciplinary playful literacy is visible through songs, rhymes, phonological play, environmental print, decoding support, spelling, or small-group instruction, and access to highly engaging and thematically relevant text sets (fiction, nonfiction, alternative texts)	☐	☐	_____
Math through play			
Adults prompt counting, comparing, measuring, sorting, composing/decomposing, patterning, and spatial reasoning during play.	☐	☐	_____
Manipulatives and real materials help children model and test mathematical ideas.	☐	☐	_____
Multilingual learner access			
Children can use home language(s), English, and translanguaging to participate, problem solve, and show knowledge.	☐	☐	_____
Adults affirm identity, use culturally and linguistically sustaining language, and connect with family/community language resources.	☐	☐	_____
Observation captures language development across contexts rather than relying only on decontextualized performance.	☐	☐	_____
Inclusion and support			

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Look-for	Consist.	Emerging	Notes
Supports for children with disabilities are embedded in small groups, routines within routines, play, and project based learning experiences.	☐	☐	_____
Adults scaffold peer entry, peer interaction, communication, and self-regulation.	☐	☐	_____
Related services, co-teaching, visuals, adaptive materials, and/or flexible grouping are used in authentic learning contexts.	☐	☐	_____
Assessment and teacher moves			
Teachers observe closely, take anecdotal notes, collect work samples, and adjust materials and prompts based on what children show.	☐	☐	_____
Teacher involvement balances child agency with purposeful guidance.	☐	☐	_____
Children explain thinking, solve problems, negotiate with peers, and persist through challenges.	☐	☐	_____

Discussion for Continuous Improvement:

Highlight of the Visit:

6. Peer coaching sheet: elevate literacy and math through play

Use during peer observation, lesson study, or collaborative planning. Focus on one play episode or center block at a time.

A. Focus area

- □ Oral language / vocabulary
- □ Phonological awareness / print / writing

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- □ Decoding / spelling / word study
- □ Math reasoning / number / spatial thinking
- □ Multilingual learner access
- □ Inclusion / embedded supports
- □ Self-regulation / peer interaction

B. What children were doing and saying

Children were using materials to _____.

Children explained or negotiated ideas by _____.

Evidence of literacy and/or math thinking included _____.

C. Teacher moves observed

Teacher extended language by _____.

Teacher made the learning goal more visible by _____.

Teacher supported access for multilingual learners or children with disabilities by _____.

D. Next-step coaching prompts

1. How might we make the literacy or math objective even more visible without reducing child agency?
2. Which open-ended questions or vocabulary prompts could deepen this play?
3. What additional materials, labels, texts, visuals, or tools would extend the play tomorrow?
4. How could related services, co-teaching, or small-group follow-up strengthen access and continuity?

E. One action to try next

We will try _____ by _____.

You can use this page to make a web of your next Project Based Learning or Inquiry! Webbing allows us to ask rich questions and get rich answers!

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Appendix A. Ready-to-print family flyer text

You can copy this page into a half-sheet handout, registration packet, pediatrician well-check handout, or school nurse flyer.

PLAY Boosts Learning READINESS

What families should know about play-based kindergarten

- Play helps children build language, early reading, early math, problem solving, self-regulation, and social skills.

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- In strong play-based classrooms, teachers do not step back - they teach on purpose. They ask questions, model language, notice learning, and connect play to literacy and math goals.
- Play is especially important for multilingual learners because it gives children low-stress ways to talk, listen, build vocabulary, and use all of their languages.
- Play also helps children with disabilities participate alongside peers while speech, OT, special education, and other supports can be embedded into authentic classroom routines.
- You can ask your school: How much uninterrupted play time do children have? How do teachers teach literacy and math through play? How are multilingual learners and children with disabilities supported during play?

Questions families can ask at registration or open house:

- What does purposeful play look like in this classroom?
- How do teachers support reading, writing, and math during centers and play?
- How will my child's language, culture, interests, and support needs be valued here?
- How do teachers observe children and communicate growth with families?

Play is not extra. It is how young children learn best.

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KINDERGARTEN ROUND-UP: QUESTION Prompts for Families

Expecting a classroom where your child will thrive

🧠 Learning Through Play

- What does **purposeful play** look like in your kindergarten classroom?
- How much **uninterrupted play time** do children have each day?
- How do teachers **teach reading, writing, and math through play**?

📖 Early Literacy & Language

- How do children develop **early reading and writing skills**?
- How do teachers support **talking, storytelling, and explaining ideas**?
- What opportunities do children have to **talk with peers and teachers**?
- How do you support children at **different learning levels**?
- How do you encourage writing as **part of the dramatic play center?**

🔢 Math Learning

- How do children learn math through **hands-on activities and play**?
- What materials (blocks, games, manipulatives) support **problem-solving**?
- How do teachers encourage children to **explain their thinking**?

🌎 Multilingual Learners

- How are children supported if they speak a **language other than English**?
- Can children use their **home language(s)** while learning?
- How do teachers build **confidence in speaking and understanding English**?
- How are **families' cultures and languages included**?

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🤝 Inclusion & Support

- How are children with different learning needs **included throughout the day**?
- How are supports (speech, OT, etc.) provided **during classroom activities**?
- How do teachers help children **build friendships and participate with peers**?
- What does **inclusion look like in action here**?

❤️ Social-Emotional Development

- How do children learn to **share, take turns, and solve problems**?
- How are children supported with **emotions and transitions**?
- How do teachers help children **keep trying when things are hard**?

🤝 Family Partnership

- How will you communicate about my child's learning?
- How can families support learning at home in **playful ways**?
- How are families' **voices and experiences valued**?

⭐ A Final Question to Ask

- How does your kindergarten program ensure children are:
    - **Engaged**
    - **Learning through meaningful experiences**
    - **Included and supported**
    - **Building strong foundations for the future**

💡 Remember:

Play is not extra — it is how young children learn best.
Strong classrooms build language, literacy, math, and confidence through **play, relationships, and meaningful experiences.**🧩 **WRITING PLAY-BASED IEP GOALS**
A practical guide for educators to ensure goals are meaningful, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate

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🎯 Why This Matters

Young children learn best through **play, interaction, and meaningful experiences**.
IEP goals should reflect *how children actually learn* by ensuring that skills are:

- Taught through **guided and free play**
- Practiced across **play, small group, and whole group**
- Assessed through **authentic observation**, not just isolated tasks

👉 **Play is not separate from instruction—it is the primary instructional context in early childhood.**

🔄 A 4-Step Process for Writing Play-Based IEP Goals

1. SPECIFIC

👉 What is the *exact skill* the child needs to develop?

- Focus on a **clear, targeted skill** (not an activity)
- Avoid vague language like “improve” or “participate”

✔ Example:
“Engage in back-and-forth conversation”
❌ Not: “Improve communication”

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2. OBSERVABLE

👉 What will you *see or hear* the child do?

- The skill must be measurable through:
  - Language
  - Actions
  - Interaction
- If you can’t observe it, you can’t measure it

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✔ Example:
“Will respond to a peer for at least 3 conversational turns”

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3. APPLICABLE ACROSS SETTINGS

👉 Can this skill happen in:

- Play
- Small group
- Whole group
- Transitions

If not, revise it.

✔ Strong goals:

- Transfer across **real classroom contexts**
- Support **generalization**, not isolated performance

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4. ASSESSED IN PLAY (AND BEYOND)

👉 Where will you collect data?

Goals should be assessed through:

- **Play (primary)**
- Small group
- Whole group
- Routines

✔ Use:

- Anecdotal notes
- Observation checklists
- Work samples
- Photos/videos (if appropriate)

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🧠 Language Frames for Play-Based IEP Goals

Use these to write strong, consistent goals:

🗣️ Communication / Oracy

> The student will engage in **[specific communication skill]** during play-based and instructional activities by **[observable behavior]** in **__ out of __ opportunities**.

📖 Early Literacy

> The student will demonstrate **[literacy skill]** during play, small group, and whole group by **[observable action]** with **__% accuracy**.

🔢 Early Math

> The student will apply **[math concept]** during hands-on play and instructional activities by **[observable behavior]** in **__ out of __ opportunities**.

❤️ Self-Regulation / Social Skills

> The student will demonstrate **[self-regulation or social skill]** during play and classroom routines by **[observable behavior]** with **__% independence**.

✏️ Play-Based IEP Goal Examples

🗣️ Communication (Back-and-Forth Interaction)

> The student will engage in reciprocal conversation with peers during play and instructional activities by initiating and responding for at least **3 conversational turns** in **4 out of 5 opportunities**.

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❓ Asking Questions

The student will ask and respond to “who, what, where, why, or how” questions during play and instructional activities in **4 out of 5 opportunities**.

📖 Early Literacy (Story Structure)

The student will represent a sequence of events (beginning, middle, end) from play experiences through drawing, dictation, or writing in **4 out of 5 opportunities**.

🔤 Foundational Literacy

The student will demonstrate phonological awareness skills (rhyming, segmenting, or blending) during play, songs, and small group activities in **4 out of 5 opportunities**.

🔢 Early Math (Number Sense)

The student will count, compare, or represent quantities during play-based and instructional activities with **80% accuracy**.

🧱 Spatial Reasoning

The student will use positional language (e.g., above, below, next to) during block play and instructional activities in **4 out of 5 opportunities**.

❤️ Self-Regulation

The student will use a taught regulation strategy (e.g., waiting, requesting help, using words) during play and classroom routines with **80% independence**.

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🤝 Peer Interaction

> The student will enter and sustain play with peers for at least **5 minutes** using appropriate social strategies in **4 out of 5 opportunities**.

🌎 Multilingual Learner Consideration (WIDA-Aligned Language)

Include this in IEPs when appropriate:

> The student may demonstrate progress using **English, home language(s), or translanguaging** across contexts. Language development will be observed through **play, interaction, and meaningful communication** over time.

👫 Inclusion Statement (Use in IEP Meetings)

> Skills will be taught and assessed within **inclusive, play-based environments** to ensure access, participation, and generalization. Supports will be embedded through co-teaching, push-in services, and natural classroom routines.

👉 **Inclusion is most effective when support happens during real learning—not separate from it.**

⭐ Key Takeaways for Teams

- Play is the **best context for generalization**
- Goals should be:
    - **Specific**
    - **Observable**
    - **Used across settings**

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    - **Measured in play**
- Strong IEPs reflect **how children actually learn**

💡 Final Reminder:

Dear Families,

Welcome to our classroom! I'm so excited to partner with you this year as your child begins an important learning journey. I want to take a moment to share something essential about our classroom approach:

👉 Young children learn best through play and meaningful, hands-on experiences.

You may hear your child talk about building, pretending, exploring, drawing, or working with classmates—and that is exactly what learning looks like in our classroom.

🧠 Why Play-Based Learning Matters

Play is not a break from learning—it is learning.

Through purposeful play, children develop:

- **Language and communication skills (talking, storytelling, asking questions)**
- **Early reading and writing skills (through books, drawing, labeling, and storytelling)**
- **Math understanding (counting, building, sorting, measuring, problem-solving)**
- **Social skills (sharing, taking turns, working with others)**
- **Self-regulation (managing emotions, staying focused, trying again when things are hard)**

When children are engaged and interested, they learn more deeply and confidently.

🎒 What Your Child Will Experience Each Day

In our classroom, your child will have opportunities to:

🧩 Play with Purpose

- **Work in centers like blocks, dramatic play, art, writing, and sensory exploration**
- **Use materials to build, create, and solve problems**

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🗣️ Talk and Learn with Others

- **Share ideas with classmates**
- **Practice listening and responding**
- **Use language to explain thinking**

📖 Build Early Literacy

- **Listen to stories and talk about them**
- **Draw and write to express ideas**
- **Explore letters, sounds, and words through explicit lessons and play**

🔢 Explore Math

- **Count, compare, and measure**
- **Build and explore shapes and space**
- **Solve problems using real materials**

❤️ Grow Socially and Emotionally

- **Learn to take turns and work with others**
- **Practice solving problems with words**
- **Build confidence and independence**

🌎 Supporting All Learners

We believe every child deserves to feel seen, valued, and supported.

In our classroom:

- **Children are encouraged to use their home language(s) along with English**
- **We support language development through conversation and play**
- **Children with different learning needs receive support within the classroom alongside their peers**

👉 **Inclusion is not separate—it is part of everything we do.**

🤝 How You Can Support Learning at Home

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You don't need worksheets or special materials—learning happens in everyday moments!

You can support your child by:

- **Talking with them about their day**
- **Reading together**
- **Letting them play, imagine, and create**
- **Asking questions like:**
    - **"What did you build today?"**
    - **"What happened in your story?"**
    - **"How did you solve that problem?"**

💬 Let's Stay Connected

Your child's learning is a partnership between school and home. Please feel free to reach out anytime with questions, ideas, or insights about your child.

💡 A Final Thought

Play and projects help children become curious, confident learners.
These experiences build the strong foundation they need for reading, math, and lifelong success.

I'm so excited for the year ahead!

Warmly,
[Teacher Name]

Note: you could follow up by sending a weekly newsletter with pictures and share-outs about how the children were learning, playing, and thinking!

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