

LearningGames¹

The Abecedarian Approach

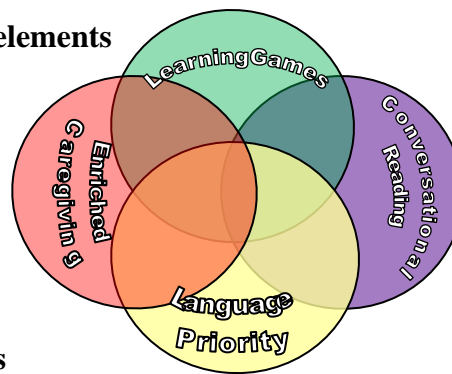
Each game is a “bite-size bit of curriculum” presented on a single page and designed to be clear enough for both educators and parents to use.

Theoretical basis

The fundamental way in which a child's higher mental functions are formed is through mediated activities shared with an adult or more competent peer. Vygotsky²

Each of the LearningGames is one of these mediated activities.

LearningGames is one of the four elements of the Abecedarian Approach



Basic principles of LearningGames

- Simple but deep
- Focuses on adult-child interaction (mainly 1-on-1 interactions & some small group experiences)
- Made up of individual items (pages) that teachers can use but can also be given to parents – parents and teachers use the *same* materials
- Flexible – used in different types of programs (kindergarten, long day care, home visiting, play groups, parent workshops, etc.)

Many of the LearningGames are designed to fit into recurring events such as arrival/departure, diapering and changing clothes, bottle feeding and mealtimes, washing hands and bathing, naptime, and going outdoors. These times or events are very important precisely because they are necessary to everyone’s well being, happen with predictable frequency, and consume a lot of time. These routines occur not only in kindergarten or the day care centre, but at home. There are 3 kinds of LearningGames activities:

- Games that are seamlessly integrated into the routines of caregiving
- Games in which the adult joins and enriches in-progress child play
- Games in which the adult initiates an interaction, inviting the child to join in

With these 3 game types, educators and parents can find something to fit into all parts of the day.

You can use the 3R Strategy to get familiar with a LearningGames activity

- **Read**
- **Role-play**
- **Reflect**

It is useful to get in a group with your fellow educators and use this 3R process. It helps to discuss the games with others. Even though the games appear to be simple, you have to dig deep into a game and study it carefully to be ready to use it effectively and powerfully with children and families.

Selecting LearningGames activities

- Study the games and get familiar with them
- Review your accumulated observations and other information about each child
- Select 1 or 2 games for individual children on the basis of your observations of the child's developmental strengths and needs – and the child's interests
- Enter those choices in your weekly lesson plan (each child's name will have 1 or 2 games by it, sometimes it is appropriate for several children have the same game)
- As you are selecting games, use the LearningGames alignment with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework to make sure you are covering all appropriate areas of development

Playing the LearningGames

- Continue with your typical daily schedule (however, keep things like group time as short as possible)
- Every time there is an opportunity, play a game with an individual child or with two children
- Have a plan with your colleague(s), so that only 1 educator at a time plays a LearningGames activity – and the other educator(s) are responsible for the rest of the group
- Make sure you get around to every child at least once during the day, see if you can get to the children with the greatest developmental need 2 or 3 times during the day
- Keep the game sessions short so that it will not be difficult to get around to every child (a greater number of short sessions is more effective than a smaller number of long sessions)
- If you want to begin more slowly, start with just 1 or 2 children and play individual games with them for a week – after that slowly add other children
- It is a good idea to divide the children in the room so that each educator has a cluster of children¹ with whom she plays games
- Play the game many times with the child, and keep thinking of ways to keep it interesting and to make it a little more challenging – for example, keep expecting and asking for a little more language (either receptive or expressive) from the child
- Play enough times so that you clearly see the child's skill and behavior changing
- Every 2 weeks review your LearningGames assignments and decide whether to retire some games and/or add others; do this for individual children (some games will last 2 weeks, some may last 4 or 5 months)

You can use LearningGames to support family partnerships

- Share them at enrollment
- Introduce them at a family workshop – use the 3R Strategy to review one or more LearningGames activities

¹ If you are using relationship-based care, this assignment may be long term. If you feel it is good for children to have a variety of adult relationships, you may want to change these assignments periodically.

- Discuss details during conferences or home visits
- When you use a game in the centre, send it home to the child's family
- Individualize for each child
- Offer several appropriate options and let the family choose
- Take a photo of a child using a LearningGames activity at the centre and share it with the child's family

Additional ideas for sharing the games with families

- Share the game at arrival or departure
- Explain the layout of the first game you share
- Keep comments brief, focus on the main idea
- Offer a quick explanation of why the game is important
- Mention similar things that you do in your classroom
- Brainstorm with families about times during the day when the family could fit the game in their busy day
- Agree to talk about the game again after they have used it for a while
- Emphasize having fun

Follow-up with families

- Ask questions about how the activity went
- Offer reassurance
- Acknowledge their commitment
- Encourage families to continue playing
- Notice the child's progress and comment on it to the family
- Encourage families to use the games over time (it takes a lot of repetition for the games to have a positive effect)

Why do LearningGames work well with families?

- Easy to read and easily used with simple materials
- Engaging photos help parents understand the activity
- Text is brief
- Explains why to play the game as well as what to do
- Includes variations and extensions

Use this checklist – if you are do these things, you are faithfully using the LearningGames element of the Abecedarian Approach

- Keep weekly plans specifying LearningGames for individual children
- Daily engage in short interactive LearningGames play sessions with individual children or very small groups (e.g., 2 children) based on the weekly plan
- Engage each child in at least one game per day
- Continue to think of ways to keep the games interesting and make them a little more challenging each time you play
- Play each game with a child for enough sessions and days to see a change in skill and behaviour in the child
- Keep a record of each child's progress and mastery of the assigned games (optional, but desirable)
- Share and explain each child's games with his or her family, and encourage the family to use the games at home

Research shows that these things predict good child outcomes

- Number of LearningGames activities implemented with the child³
- Child mastery of LearningGames
- Parental interest in LearningGames⁴

So, to guarantee the best outcomes for your children, try to do **enough** of the games, try to see that children play each game until it is **mastered**, and try to encourage parent **interest** and involvement in the games.

Research also shows that parents who participate regularly in parent workshops on the games make significant gains in:

- Conversational reading skills
- Responsiveness to child⁵

Centres and MACS may find the research-validated LearningGames useful because these games are presented simply but contain deep child development concepts and information. The games are flexible enough to be used by both early childhood professionals and parents. They can form a link between the Centre and the home, supporting a sense of collaboration or partnership between parents and educators.

¹ Sparling, J., & Lewis, I., Introduction by Craig & Sharon Ramey. (2000, 2001, 2002, 2003,2004). *LearningGames: The Abecedarian Curriculum*. Hillsborough, NC: MindNurture, Inc.

² Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

³ Sparling, J., Lewis, I., Ramey, C. T., Wasik, B. H., Bryant, D. M., LaVange, L. M. (1991). Partners, a curriculum to help premature, low-birth-weight infants get off to a good start. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 11(1), 36-55.

⁴ Liaw, F., Meisels, S.J., Brooks-Gunn, J. (1995). The effects of experience of early intervention on low birth weight, premature children: The Infant Health and Development Program. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 10, 405-431.

⁵ Judkins, D., St. Pierre, R., Gutmann, B., Goodson, B., von Glatz, A., Hamilton, J., et al. (2008). *A study of classroom literacy interventions and outcomes in even start*. NCEE 2008-4028 National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. Available from: ED Pubs. P.O. Box 1398, Jessup, MD 20794-1398. Tel: 877-433-7827; Retrieved January 29, 2009 from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20084028.asp>