Why Are Children Playing?
For the young child, play and work involve the same actions: interacting with people, manipulating objects, and making discoveries that help make sense of the world. Learning happens naturally through play. Play is the work of children. For school success, children must develop physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and creatively. Play is a crucial part of this development of the whole child.

What Are Table Toys?
The early childhood classroom should be filled with age-appropriate opportunities for children to practice coordinating what the eye sees with what the hand can do. Table toys – often called manipulatives – address the development of this critical skill while promoting children's discovery play and exploration of basic concepts. When children experience interesting and challenging materials, they are creating a knowledge base for interpreting the world and for making sense of it. Later they will talk about, draw, read about, and otherwise use the concepts they have learned. Small-muscle activities such as puzzles, small construction sets, and other table toys are normally found in an area of the classroom defined by low, open shelves and child-size tables and chairs.

What Are Children Learning?
Young children practice fine motor development and refine eye-hand coordination as they manipulate table toys. These are critical skills for reading and writing readiness. Children who are stringing beads, stacking small blocks, fitting, connecting, and turning knobs are training their fingers to grasp small objects and control their placement. At the same time, children are teaching their eyes to track their hand's movements.

When children use shape sorters and puzzles, they learn to distinguish attributes of objects as they compare, match, and sort. They begin to recognize colors, sizes, and basic mathematical shapes. As they attempt to fit pieces into spaces, children engaged in these types of activities acquire the ability to discriminate visually – a skill that will help them distinguish letters as they learn to read.

Materials like shape sorters and puzzles that are more closed-ended and self-correcting have value in that they allow children to see if what they are trying to do works. If something doesn't work, they can experiment, adjust, try again, and “check their work” independently.
Using small interlocking building blocks and other open-ended construction materials encourages children to think creatively. They learn to see spatial relationships as they build, to think through a process, and to persist at tasks until they are completed.

Playing matching games, playing lotto games, and using counting and sorting materials to sequence and classify are activities that help children learn to identify relationships among objects. This is a basic skill that is necessary for critical and scientific thinking processes.

As young children play with pegs and pegging boards or mats, they can find out about patterns and discover that individual pieces may join to create a larger image. Pegging provides practice with small motor skills and hands-on experiences with one-to-one correspondence.

Children also learn to think logically, understand cause and effect, and predict outcomes when they are involved with table toys. For example, young children playing with stacking and nesting toys conclude through play that larger will not go into smaller and that smaller will stack on top of larger. Children enjoy the drama of changing a compact “nest” into a tall tower – and back again!

What Can You Do to Encourage Children’s Learning?

- Start by giving children comfortable spaces where they can play with table toys. The right-sized tables and chairs will invite children to play and to stay longer at their play. A soft, sturdy mat or carpet will provide the opportunity to move the activity to the floor if children prefer.

- Create a learning environment for young children that is filled with a variety of fun-to-use, hands-on, and visually stimulating manipulatives that will help children acquire basic skills through play. Include materials that reinforce diverse skills: puzzles; size, shape, and color sorters; construction and pegging toys; beads and laces. Have enough variety available at one time to provide choices as well as some duplicates or similar materials to avoid conflicts.

- Be selective with what is provided for children. Choose manipulatives of good quality. Be sure they are safe and durable as well as easy to clean. If a toy makes a noise, check to see if the noise is related to the concept presented. Avoid table toys with extraneous graphics like cartoon figures that can clutter the materials and confuse their purpose.

- Place manipulatives on open shelves where they can be easily accessed by young children. Leaving open space around the materials on the shelf allows them to be seen for what they are and not become lost in visual disorder.

- Be aware of the age and abilities of the children using the materials. Younger children will need fewer, larger, and simpler pieces to manipulate than older children. Manipulatives should be challenging enough to be interesting, but not so difficult that children become frustrated.
• As with any play, allow the children to take the lead. Use of a particular manipulative should not be assigned. Children should be able to select what they want to play with and to stop when they are ready.

• Respect children's different learning styles and let them explore naturally. It may appear that a child is not doing the “right” thing. One child may stack all of the triangles from the shape sorter and ignore the base. Another may sort and align all of the blue pegs instead of pegging. Both are making their own discoveries and building their own knowledge.

• To encourage independent creative thinking, provide materials that can be combined in new and unique ways. For example, allow children to mix pegging rings with beads for stringing activities.

• Talk with children as they play. Describe their actions and give them word names they may not know: “You are putting the red circle on the green square.” Ask open-ended questions to prompt thinking: “How do you think you can get them all in there?” Help them refine their strategies: “That doesn’t seem to fit. Why do you think it won’t? Do you think another piece will? Why?”

• As children play with table toys, they continue to build basic skills, and their knowledge grows layer upon layer. The more variety available and the more interchangeable the materials, the more varied the opportunities to explore and the concepts to learn.

A Publication of the Environments Professional Group
The Environments Professional Group is a team of educators and designers who come together to make the connection between the needs of early childhood programs and the developmentally appropriate products that meet these needs.

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