Playful Learning: Weaving Curriculum into Free Play

A Holistic Approach for Early Childhood Educators

The Learning Cycle below describes four interconnected steps teachers use to weave intentional curriculum into children's free play — creating rich learning experiences that are responsive, flexible, and joy-filled.

The Learning Cycle

Step 1
Intentional Environments

- Purposefully design play spaces
- Provide rich, open-ended materials: blocks, art supplies, sensory bins, and dramatic play props
- Rotate materials based on learning themes

Step 2
Observe & Identify

- Watch children's interests and actions
- Recognize spontaneous learning moments (e.g., counting blocks, mixing colors, storytelling)
- Document observations

Step 3
Guide & Scaffold

- Ask open-ended questions to deepen thinking
- Introduce related vocabulary
- Offer gentle suggestions or new materials to extend play without directing it
- Connect play to real-world concepts

Step 4
Reflect & Expand

- Engage children in discussions about their play
- Summarize learning experiences
- Plan future activities based on observations
- Share insights with families

Key: Flexibility, Responsiveness, & Joyful Discovery