A Handbook for Play in a Virtual Space

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Christyn Dundorf of TPP recommended the book, *Cultivating the Genius of Black Children* (2016), to reflect on how classroom practices can better support our Black children. In supporting our Black children, we make classrooms better for all children. Below are Debra Ren-Etta Sullivan's principles for supporting Black children and some ways this focus on play connects to them:

Tenet	Which means	So in play….
Sharing goals and expectations (pp 89-92)	Initiate conversations with families about their goals for their children and the best ways to provide challenges. Create collaborative goals. Ask children what they want to learn. Listen to children's suggestions. Take feedback.	We ask families and children what materials they like to use and explore with at home. We avoid prescribed play themes (kitchen or Thomas trains) and single purpose toys (letter stamps) at open-ended play times. We ask families about how their child plays, and how they feel about the role of play.
Sharing power and control (pp 93-96)	Encourage conversation, anticipate and accept listening involves movement and talking. We listen more than we talk. We give decisions to children.	We co-construct decisions about clean-up, organization, and joining play in progress. We build spaces for collaborative conversations and we accept that children make decisions that may differ from ours, as long as everyone is safe.
Sharing discourse and ideas (pp 96-98)	Tell, and ask children to tell, stories. Encourage lots of conversations, questions, and opinions. Facilitate in conversations, do not lead them. You know that children have something to contribute and you seek and value their contributions.	We use storytelling as a launch point for play, and as a reflective practice for how the play time went. We do not censor children's stories, we honor and celebrate their voices. When a story make us uncomfortable we first explore our own adult reactions for bias before responding to the child.
Sharing the room (pp 98-101)	The room feels familiar and comfortable to Black children. There is an emphasis on exploration and a "hands on" set-up. The room is decorated together. (There, are of course, health and safety considerations in this these days, but the spirit remains the same.)	We encourage the children to name and organize the areas of the room. We ask families to send in loose parts and beautiful stuff from home that we can use in our spaces. We do not have a generic "food" pantry in the kitchen, we use the boxes and cans and containers that children bring from home. Our dress up consists of donated items from families.
Sharing the daily routine (pp 101-105)	Focus on children over focusing on time, you follow their interests. You will have a co-constructed agenda to help children understand their day, but you will not cut children off to move to the next thing and the next thing and the next thing.	Play is valued as a time of complex and essential learning, not an earned event. Even when children are at home, or in school part-time, time is made for play.
Sharing classroom management (pp 105-110)	Note: I would like to copy this whole section in here verbatim, it's that powerful and good. I will instead settle on this quote: "What you will never hear is a child's name used as a punishment (DEBRA!!! Stop that right now!!) turning something lovingly chosen for a precious baby into an instrument of torture and humiliation." (pp 108)	Play is not policed. Norms for play, and the ways we tell others we are uncomfortable, are co-constructed. Children's opinions are given weight towards the ultimate decisions on community rules. We release an expectation of sameness and work towards each child contributing in meaningful ways. *Not everyone has to clean up.* But everyone does have to help the community.

Section 1: Virtual Play

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There will be a variety of ways we can engage children in playful, joyful learning experiences. Play is a way of thinking about learning, not a specific set of materials or experiences. I do try to draw a line between "fun things" and real, authentic play. Fun things are experiences like: coming to the zoom read aloud dressed up like a character, using materials in your house to build the bridge for the Three Billy Goats Gruff, and counting all the toes in your family. Though they will be fun, and elicit giggles, these activities lack the deeper imaginative self-directed element that makes play so magical. Should you count all the toes in your family? Absolutely! But should you also have time to play in self-directed ways! Yes! If you think caregivers may push back to this, see the resources provided under"Getting Families Onboard".

Regardless, we will NEED to enlist the help of families and caregivers to make virtual learning a success. So even if families are fully onboard with the idea of play, they may be unsure of what they should/should not do, how much to help, etc. The big idea here is that children can be independent when they are playing because they are in charge. Families may need to help with set-up, but even that can be minimized with some upfront conversations with families about making materials easy to grab and stored in a location that a child can access independently. Space is at a premium in many households, so the storage option I suggest could slide under a couch or a bed. In the chart I indicate how much support might be required from a caregiver with each structure.

Play Structure/ Caregiver support required (CS)	Which means...	Details (time/synchronous/ asynchronous, etc)
Play Workshop Low/Mid CS: help child log on to computer, help child select play group if done asynchronously. Do not have to be present during the play workshop time.	Children determine play themes and materials (eg blocks, or store). Children play in collaborative groups. Children make and create many of the materials needed to play. Reflective conversations start or end the play workshop.	Synchronous - Everyone at reflective conversation if possible - Breakout or small groups to play collaboratively (store group, blocks group) Every day 35-45 minutes

Outdoor Play, Big Movement play Varied CS: varies on space available and activity. Go noodle: low support, walk around the block: high support.	Children move their bodies in big ways, get some air if they can. Go for walks, explore, run around the apartment, etc	Asynchronous, or used as a transition between synchronous activities Every day As frequently as possible
Materials Explore		
Choice Time Low: CS: help child set up plan (if using that structure) and then walk away while child plays	Children play with whatever they would like for some needed downtime and personal exploration. Though toys are not suggested, this is a time for children to practice independence, agency and decision making so if children opt to play a video game or play with trains, that is more than okay.	Asynchronous Children can submit play plansand send pictures of what they did, but that is optional.

Ideally we will be able to send home baggies of materials for children to play and work with across the day. The best materials will be open ended, reusable, and easy to access.

First and foremost we should be focusing on a loose parts collection for each child. This can be co-constructed by families and supplemented by the school, if possible. Items like cardboard tubes, nuts and washers, clothespins, yogurt containers, have infinite possibilities in the hand of children. I have always been a big fan of the "Beautiful Stuff" unit. Children collect things from their homes and the materials are used as a launch pad into counting and collection work, sorting, vocabulary development, and ultimately creation and revision. The main difference is now that work of studying the beautiful stuff will happen in small groups over a virtual platform, but the rest can stand.

In addition to home curated loose parts, these are items that might round out a "play bag":

Peg people: limitless possibilities here, use them to re-enact, to build, to play, to role play, as counters

Aquarium stones: limitless here as well! Counters, building materials, imaginary play, to build letters and words

A whiteboard and several markers: to make play plans, signs, blue prints, as well as more traditional academic uses

A pile of art materials: fresh crayons, glue, tape, scissors, maybe some reusable clay or wire for sculpting

A ream of white paper

A small tupperware to make an at home water table or sensory table (and can store items)

In order to facilitate virtual play groups, it will be helpful to have a virtual choice time board. To preserve the integrity and autonomy of our players, and to make sure we are sharing power and space with our students, I would set up a system of children proposing play groups. You could ask at a morning zoom, "What should our play groups be today?" or you can set up a padlet, jamboard and google doc for children to submit ideas.

Here is a sample choice board made on googleslides (use screenshots of children's real choices if you can) . If you share the slide in a zoom call, children can sign up with the annotate feature. If they sign up in an asynchronous way, they can type their name into the text box with help from an adult.

Here is another sample using jamboard. Jamboard is a google extension that works as a whiteboard. To make this I imported images (again, you can use photos) and created stickies with names. Kids can all access the jamboard and pull their name over to their choice for the day. This is the closest thing I can find to a virtual pocket chart. You can change the size of the stickies to accommodate more names.
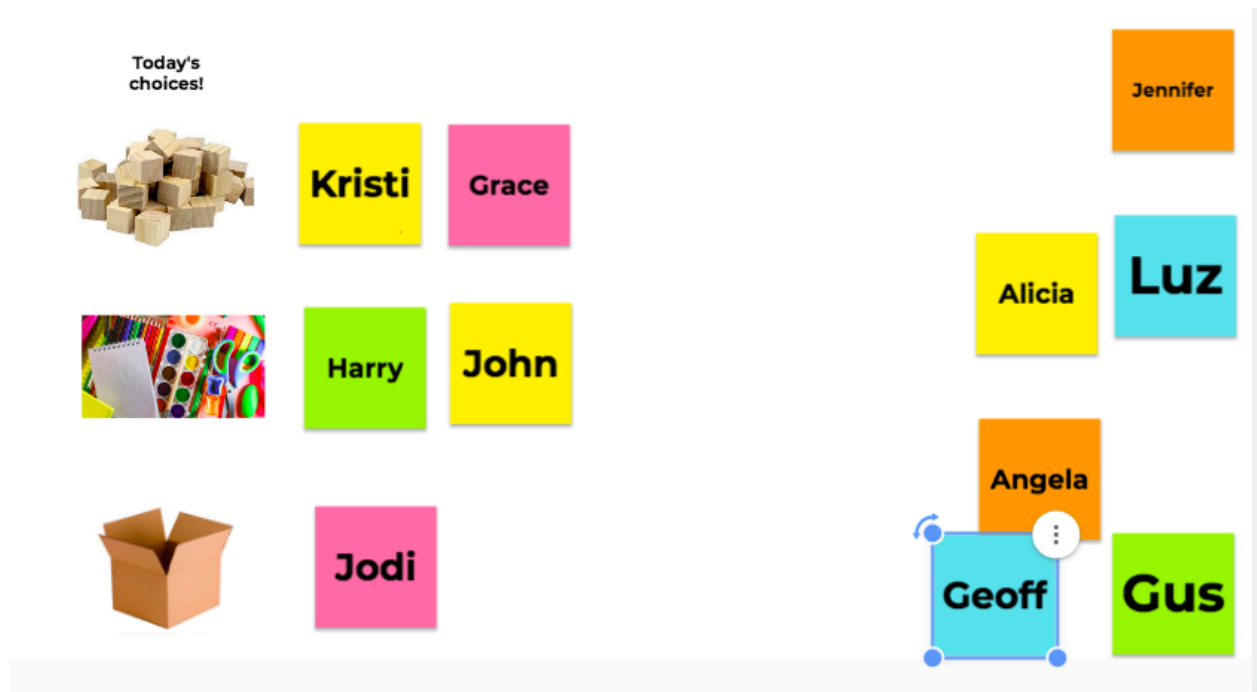
If you'd like to try the jamboard, here is a link. It is set to edit so you can try moving the names, but please do not change it besides testing out that feature. Thank you.

It's up to you if you will have kids swap around which group they are in, much like how children might move between centers in the classroom. For logistics, you may keep them in one and help them figure out how to make it work, or they change what they are playing with and stay with the group. If you feel like you can manage moving kids around, you can also do that.

So, here is the deal. You will have virtual playgroups. Kids will submit ideas, you will have a time when they all log on for play group and you will put them into "breakout" groups to play (option 1) If you cannot have breakout groups, you will likely give each group a time to log on and play together. (option 2)

Option 1: Total 45-50 minutes

Synchronous All children	Collaborative conversation about virtual play (eg: asking people what they are making, playing together, making sure people can see what you are doing, etc)			
Synchronous Breakout groups. Teacher moves between groups	Group 1 (sample) Art	Group 2 (sample) Blocks/building	Group 3 (sample) Cars	Group 4: Cat Family
Synchronous All children	Share screenshots or examples from the breakouts to reflect and grow learning and ideas			

Option 2: Total 60 minutes teacher time/15-20 minute student time

Asynchronous All children	Receive a time ro log on to play group
Synchronous (15 min or so)	Group 1 (sample) Art
Start new synchronous group	Group 2 (sample) Blocks/building
Start new synchronous group	Group 3 (sample) Cars
Start new synchronous group	Group 4: Cat Family
Synchronous All children	Share screenshots or examples from the breakouts to reflect and grow learning and ideas

Regardless of which format you have to use, you will be hanging out with your players. So what to do? We don't want to overwhelm the play with our presence, but we do want to help build relationships, a sense of connectedness and belonging, and support oral language development and the executive function skills play supports so powerfully.

You will want to make sure children have their zoom on gallery view, and you might mute yourself or even turn off your camera (if that is allowed) so that you can be in the background. You might take notes on what you see children trying, take screenshots to use for other purposes, or unmute to ask questions or coach.

If you see…	You might ask…
A child playing out a scene without really talking	_____ can you tell us the story of what is happening? What are they saying? What are they doing? What are you pretending? Who are you?
Parallel play	_____ can you ask _____ what they are making? _____,, did you see how _____ made/did/is _____? Could that connect to yours? _____ can you ask _____ about _____?
Lots of talking, no conversation, eg a lot of talking over each other	Whoa! I am a little lost! Can you help me understand what we are playing? Should we make a plan? What are we making/doing/pretending? What are our roles?
Frustration, anger, big feelings	How are you feeling? What do you need? Do you have a strategy that can help you? Do you want to keep your feeling or change your feelings?

Hidden is in scare quotes because the academics aren't really hidden at all, but it can look that way to others. Let's talk about some ways to amplify the academic work within the context of play and outside the context of play.

Inside of Play Times:
You want to channel your inner swiss army knife and be prepared for just about anything to pop up in children's play. Rather than strong arming a child into retelling the plot of your read aloud, if we observe closely, we may be able to ask questions that nudge children to demonstrate knowledge or skills that we have not seen revealed in other contexts. The key is to get a sense of where the child is playing, and what question might help us understand the child's thinking and reasoning.

If we see…	It leads us to standards in…	And we could ask… (and listen for)
A child engaging in fantasy play	ELA	"Tell me the story of what is happening?" - Sequence - Emotional response - details
A child re-enacting a favorite book or movie	ELA	"Ooh, what are you playing?" - Sequence - Key details - theme
A child building/stacking/ lining up	Math/Science	"What are you discovering here?" "What are you noticing here?" What are you trying here? - Counting and quantifying - 1-1 tagging - Sorting - Patterning - measurement
Family and community play	Social Studies	"Tell me about your _____" • SS standards and understandings

Outside of Play Times:

We might take some of the materials, storylines, and moments from play to do a bit of a closer look at some academic work. Let's take a quick look at what we could do:

Use screenshots:
(I am using my own child, who is 3, because he is nearby and makes an easy subject because I can give myself permission to use his photos)

Use interactive writing (I have the annotate option open on zoom, but jamboard would work here as well) to label and build sentences. You can work on phonics, concepts about print, letter formation, vocabulary and all that great stuff, anchored in a joyful playful experience.

You can make shared reading books. I am using google slides as a way to make books about all the thinks the community can do. We might make a page or two in our small group, and then all the pages come together as a shared text we can all read.

We can use screenshots to count, pattern, label. We can make them into collections to count, books to read, materials to label. They can stir book ideas and help us retell what happened. We can use them to make an ABC chart or a number line. They are matched to kids interests and passions, they are unique to my community. They are meaningful because they are us.

It is reasonable for all of us to defer to what we know best in times of uncertainty. Many families and caregivers are worried about their children, and ensuring they do not fall too terribly behind at this time. Therefore, many families and caregivers imagine school should go for their children as it went for them. It is our responsibility to listen to, and honor, that concern, and also help them understand the critical role play has in their child's emotional, academic, and social development. You may offer a zoom call, a phone call, or a letter (like the sample below) to help families embrace and understand this time of day. Families may also be struggling with helping their child be independent, or finding time to do their own work. After polling families to find out their challenges and hopes for the year I might offer a series of workshops or videos for families to offer support. I could imagine the following short workshops or videos:

- Understanding the value of play
- What are play materials/loose parts? How can we store them? How will we use them?
- Helping your child with independence

Here is a sample letter from last spring (with translations) that might serve as a starting point for your own letters or communication:

Dear Families,

In our classroom, play and inquiry are an important part of our day. Play is one of the main ways that children learn about the world around them and explore many of the big ideas we learn about in our schooling.

This packet is to facilitate this play and work at home. If at first glance this work doesn't seem "academic" enough, there is plenty of research that finds kids engaged in play are often working at a higher level then when they are doing more traditional sit-down academic tasks. The professor Lillian Katz draws a line between academic skills (the alphabet and the number sequence) and intellectual skills (curiosity, problem solving, flexibility). Play facilitates the development of intellectual skills, and also allows for the application of academic skills. For example, a child playing with water, might use intellectual skills to make a boat, but then apply academic skills to write the name of the boat on the side. Intellectual skills do not come from worksheets.

Play is also a time when children develop self-regulation, organization, and working memory. All skills essential for learning academics.

Feel free to continue to do packets, play math games online and on the ipad, and practice other academic skills, but also try to balance that with opportunities for open ended play.

What follows in this packet is some suggested play areas for your child/ren. They do not require toys, but rather materials around your apartment or house. You do not need to supervise your child at play, but check in at the beginning and end of their time. If your child gets bored quickly, do not offer something new, encourage them to work through the boredom.
Warmly,

A HUGE thank you to Marcia Elwarari for her spanish translation:

Queridas familias,

En nuestro salón de clases, el juego y la investigación son una parte importante de nuestro día. Jugar es una de las principales maneras en que los niños aprenden sobre el mundo que los rodea y exploran muchas de las grandes ideas que aprendemos en nuestra educación.

Este paquete es para facilitar este juego y el trabajo en casa. Si a primera vista este trabajo no parece lo suficientemente "académico", hay un montón de investigación que encuentra que los niños involucrados en el juego a menudo están trabajando en un nivel más alto que cuando están haciendo trabajo más tradicional en clase. La profesora Lillian Katz traza una línea entre las habilidades académicas (el alfabeto y la secuencia numérica) y las habilidades intelectuales (curiosidad, resolución de problemas, flexibilidad). El juego facilita el desarrollo de habilidades intelectuales, y también permite la aplicación de habilidades académicas. Por ejemplo, un niño que juega con el agua, podría usar habilidades intelectuales para hacer un barco, pero luego aplicar habilidades académicas para escribir el nombre del barco en el lado. Las habilidades intelectuales no provienen de una hoja de ejercicios.

El juego también es un momento en el que los niños desarrollan la autorregulación, la organización y la memoria funcional. Todas las habilidades esenciales para el aprendizaje de cosas académicas.

Siéntase libre de seguir haciendo los paquetes de actividades que tienen, jugar juegos de matemáticas en la red del internet y en el ipad, y practicar otras habilidades académicas, pero también tratar de equilibrar eso con oportunidades para jugar.

Atentamente,

A HUGE thank you to Rita Kwan for her Chinese translation.
[Chinese Translation Here](#)

As an early childhood teacher, I always saw one of my main goals in the classroom as building children's independence and agency. Some children are more independent in their home spaces, some are less. We can help families nurture more independence at home with a few guidelines they might try. I think a ¼ adult supported to ¾ independent ratio is a reasonable one to expect from our younger children. That is to say if you have 20 minutes of time, ¼ of it (5 minutes) can be adult supported, and the remaining ¾ (15 minutes) should be the child working or playing with independence. That time span will grow, but the ratio can stay the same. Our youngest ones do need the time and attention of an older caregiver, but they also need the respect and capability communicated by the time for independence as well. This ratio can help split the difference and communicates to the caregiver, yes, your child needs you, but not forever.

What to say if…

Your child says…	You might say…
I'm bored	Where could you find more ideas? Could you try something new with those materials? Set a timer for 5 more minutes. What happens in that time?
I'm done	Will you start something new with those materials or change what you made?
I can't….	Give it a try! You have done hard things before.
I want you to play with me	Let's set a time for __ minutes. When that goes off I can play with you for __ minutes.
I don't know what to do next	Give it a try. Maybe you will invent something new!
(fighting with sibling)	Use your strategies: • Take space • Talk it out (I feel __ when __) • Use a tool (a book, a sand timer, etc) to calm down

Another HUGE thank you to Marcia Elwarari for her Spanish translation.

Qué puede decir si…

Su hijo/a dice…	Usted puede decir…
Estoy aburrido/a	
He terminado.	¿Empezarás algo nuevo con esos materiales o cambiarás lo que hiciste?
No puedo….	¡Tratalo! Has hecho cosas difíciles antes.
Quiero que juegues conmigo	Fijemos una alarma por---- minutos. Cuando suene , puedo jugar contigo durante----minutos.
No sé qué hacer a continuación	Tratalo. ¡Tal vez inventes algo nuevo!
(peleando con su hermano)	Utilice sus estrategias: • Tomar espacio • Expresen sus sentimientos (Me siento__ cuando ___) • Utilice una herramienta (un libro, un temporizador de arena, etc.) para calmarse

Another HUGE thank you to Rita Kwan for her Chinese translation.
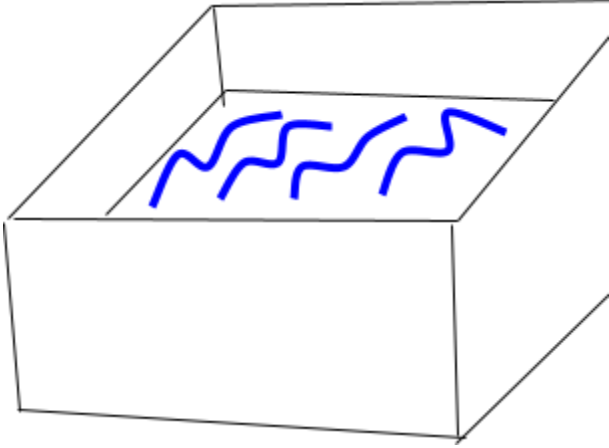Chinese Translation Here

If families need more support visualizing the at home choice time portion, you might use the following materials.

Directions:

1. At the start of the day, ask your child what play choice they want to make for today's choice workshop, and the materials they will use (use the samples below for help).

2. Have your child draw, write or tell you what they think they will do with those materials.

3. Set the materials up and walk away. If you are worried about mess, throw down an old towel or whatever you have.

4. If your child comes to you, use the tips sheet (included).

5. After 45-60 minutes, clean up. Talk about how it went (see the tips sheet).

6. Use an extension (if you like).

Suggested Play Choices

Play Choice 1: Water Play

Main Materials	Supplemental Materials
Tupperware Water 	Use any: ● Measuring cups ● Eye droppers ● Basters ● Funnels ● Food coloring ● Rocks, wood, leaves ● Glue, paper, markers ● Containers ● Aquatic animal figures
Skills developed here: ● Volume ● Properties of water ● Engineering ● Problem solving	*Option:* *Make it a sensory table and change out the materials to beans, rice, pasta, dirt, sand, etc*

Questions to ask: (if you decide to check in)
- What is happening here?
- What are you making?
- What do you think would happen if....?
- What are you noticing?

Play Choice 2: Construction Play

Main Materials	Supplemental Materials
Anything you can build with: • Package of solo cups • Blocks • Toothpicks and cut sponges • Popsicle sticks • Legos (without direction booklets)	Use any: • Clothespins • Rug or fabric scraps • Small cars, animals, or people • Pictures or books with different buildings
Skills developed here: • Storytelling • Balance and equivalence • Engineering • 3 dimensional shapes	*Option:* *You can print out photos of your family, or street signs, that children can use in their play*

Questions to ask: (if you decide to check in)
- What is happening here? Tell me the story here?
- What are you making?
- What do you think would happen if....?
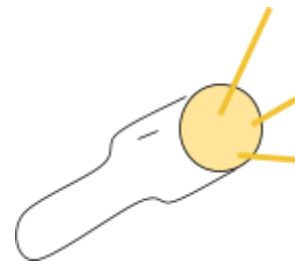- What are you noticing?

Play Choice 3: Maker Play

Main Materials	Supplemental Materials
Your recycling bin materials Glue Scissors Tape	Use any: ● Big cardboard boxes ● Small cardboard boxes ● Materials from nature ● Pictures and books of inspiration (if your child thinks they would like to make an airplane, try to have an airplane picture or book)
Skills developed here: ● Planning and organization ● Flexibility ● Engineering ● Problem solving	*Option:* *Encourage your child make a bigger project: A restaurant, a school, an airport so this becomes a multi-day project*

Questions to ask: (if you decide to check in)
- What is happening here?
- What are you making?
- What do you think would happen if....?
- What are you noticing?
- What else do you need?

Play Choice 4: Light Play

Main Materials	Supplemental Materials
Flashlight or tea lights	Use any: • Blocks • Fabric • Colored, clear solo cups • Paper • Markers • Books (like the shine-a-light series) • Toys that can cast reflections (think dinosaurs, lego figures, etc) • White sheet on the wall
Skills developed here: • Storytelling • Properties of light • Engineering • Problem solving	*Option:* *Watch some shadow puppet videos on youtube to get a sense of how people tell stories with shadows*

Questions to ask: (if you decide to check in)
- What is happening here? What are you making?
- What do you think would happen if....?
- What are you noticing?

Play Choice 5: Dramatic Play

Main Materials	Supplemental Materials
Real life stuff (As opposed to "dress-up" or toy stuff)	Use any: • Cooking utensils • Clothes from your closet • Old phone • Old computer • Old envelopes, paper, list pads
Skills developed here: • Storytelling • Problem solving • Oral language • Fantasy play (which aids literacy development)	*Option:* *Tie this one to the maker play*

Questions to ask: (if you decide to check in)
- What is happening here? Who are you? What are you pretending?
- What are you making?
- What do you think would happen if....?
- What are you noticing?

If you do not know these standards, this is prime time to check them out. Play is FILLED with opportunities to engage in studies of identity, diversity, and to take action. Children are never too small to talk about what it means to be included and visible, to talk about fairness and unfairness, to explore what it means to be different and still be friends.

Here are the Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards