



# ECERS-3 Free Play and Access



Free play refers to unstructured, child-led activities where children explore, create, and interact without strict rules or adult direction both inside and outside. It allows them to make choices, use their imagination, and develop important skills through play. Providing children with a wide range of choices and accessible materials is most beneficial for children's development. Free play supports cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, helping children learn naturally while having fun.

Access means that children can get to and use materials, equipment, space, and furnishings independently without needing help from teachers. It encourages independence and children's engagement in free play and learning. For these reasons, access to materials, equipment, space, and furnishings for specific times can be found in more than 15 items throughout the ECERS-3 – it's that important!

## **Access is restricted when any of the following occur:**

**Limited play options** – The teacher selects limited materials for children to use.

**Whole group participation** – Children are expected to engage in activities as a group for long periods of time or when they are not interested.

**Assigned play areas** – Children are assigned to specific centers and directed where to play.

**Restricted access to materials** – Items are stored in locked cabinets, placed out of children's reach, or kept in difficult-to-open containers.

**Closing certain centers** – Some play areas, such as blocks or dramatic play, are closed at specific times. This idea applies to group transitions as well.

**Mandatory rotation through centers** – Children must move between play areas on a set schedule, cleaning up in between, resulting in brief and interrupted play periods.

Encouraging free play in early childhood, as highlighted in ECERS-3, helps build creativity, social skills, and a strong foundation of learning. When children are given the freedom to choose, explore, and engage meaningfully with their environment, they thrive.

**Protecting time for free play and access to materials, equipment, space and furnishings is best practice and essential for supporting well-rounded development.**