

Say Yes Scenarios



Playful Learning Activity Card

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Purpose

How to respond to students' playful initiatives

Process

- ▷ Each day teachers make dozens of decisions, responding to learners' playful initiative. Here we present six scenarios that involve such decisions: yes or no to play. There is no one right answer concerning how to resolve these scenarios. Their value is in the conversations we hope they will provoke, helping you and your colleagues become more intentional about deciding when to say yes to the mess.
- ▷ Consider acting out the scenarios with your students, as well as discussing them.

Scenarios

1. The Highwire Reader

Six-year-old Dianne has a mercurial personality. One moment she can be smiling and affectionate. The next, she can be howling in rage. The smallest slight or disappointment—not getting the snack she wanted or having to wait for a toy—can trigger these dark moments. The source of her unhappiness is not hard to pinpoint. Her parents are divorced (with her dad mostly out of the picture). Her mom works long hours and doesn't have much time to spend with her daughter. You and your co-teacher are working hard to support Dianne regulate her emotions and help her be a valued member of the classroom community as the rest of the children are understandably disturbed by her frequent tantrums.

You have taken 6 children from your class to a common space in the school. Each has a book, and you have asked them to find a comfortable spot to read. With a big smile on her face Dianne climbs up on a partition, not designed for sitting, that is about 2 meters high. She lies on her stomach and is happily reading her book. "This is fun", she exclaims. One problem: you have heard colleagues tell other children no one is allowed to climb on the partition for safety reasons.

Do you say yes or no to Dianne's playful reading space?

2. To Tech or Not to Tech

You are primary teacher facilitating a unit of inquiry on play. One group of kids initiated an inquiry into robot design, sparking a whole class interest. As a grade-level teaching team, you have decided to make the unit's summative assessment involve kids making their own robots in small groups. During the first unit lesson, your class started building robots from recycled materials. They are very engaged, and you are pleased to see how creative they are being.

Across the hall, the other class and their techy teachers started building and programming Lego robots using the computer program scratch. When your students find out that their friends in the other class are “actually making real robots”, they are all deflated and discouraged. You are still at the very beginning of your summative assessment and might be able to change the course. But aside from the many reports you have to write, you are skeptical of how such technology might work (or not work) in your classroom. Last month you introduced a writing app to your students. While it worked great during the PD session you attended, it was a disaster in the classroom. iPads ran out of power or crashed, children couldn’t figure out how to make the app work, and everyone got very frustrated. In meeting learning goals, pencils and paper would have been as effective and far less stressful.

Do you get on board with the technology to support your children's playful wishes or let their imaginations suffice?

3. Can We Just Go?

Your class has difficulty lining up to go to the canteen or specialist classes. It seems to always be the same students who are ready to go, and then wait for others to get in line. Some have started to ask, “can we just go?” They are convinced they are mature enough to walk the halls without your supervision. Indeed, it can take 10 minutes of class time to line up and get to the next location. Specialist teachers have complained about wasting precious teaching time as well. Lining up is the least playful part of the day.

During a Professional Development Day, you visited a school and were surprised to see kids moving around on their own with no lines and no teacher following them. It seemed to be a smooth and playful process, although you wonder how the teachers keep tabs on safety and behavior. While the children chatter and walk in creative ways (e.g., skipping; holding hands in pairs), they behave and do not interrupt other classes.

Upon returning to your school, you discuss the possibility of children transiting without lining up with your team teacher. She agrees that this would work well for most of your students. However, you both worry about a couple of students whose impulse control isn’t fully developed. It is likely they might disturb other classes on their walks (or runs) down the hall, and even pose safety risks to themselves and others.

Do you say yes to the request to “just go”?

4. Yes or No to a “Dangerous Book”

You are a bit frustrated by your 8th-grade (13 and 14-year-old) students. A major learning goal you and your colleagues have for them is to take the initiative in their own learning. These young adolescents are often passive in the classroom, waiting for you to tell them what to do. So you are pleased when two of your students, picking up on an invitation to nominate books to include in an upcoming unit on contemporary literature, come to you saying they have a book they want to read.

Temporarily pleased, that is. Your pleasure evaporates when you learn what book they are nominating. While of high literary quality (it has received excellent reviews), the novel has explicit themes of sexuality and violence that makes you uncomfortable. You have overheard a fellow teacher, who’s child is in your class say, “That’s a dangerous book. There is no way I would let my child read it.”

Do you say yes or no to your students’ request?

5. Gun Play

Your class of 14 and 15-year-olds is discussing activities for an upcoming "Passion Day." Held four times during the school year, during Passion Days, the normal timetable is suspended. Instead, students, parents, and teachers lead activities that they are passionate about. During past Passion Days students have created music videos, organized football tournaments, and invented new chicken recipes.

Fred has an idea. He suggests that he and his fellow students go to a local shooting range. Normally reserved, Fred excitedly describes how he can share his expertise in using a variety of guns and rifles. While a number of families at the school, like Fred's, have experience with guns, either as hunters or in the military, the majority are not gun owners. You know that many of your colleagues, well aware of mass shootings at schools and other locales around the world, feel guns have no place in school activities.

How do you respond to Fred's request?

6. Yes or No to Soccer

The final Passion Day of the year is approaching. During all of the previous Passion Days Per, a P2 student, has elected to play soccer. Soccer is indeed Per's passion. He plays soccer during outside breaks and afterschool. He talks about soccer with his friends. More days than not, he comes to school wearing the jersey of his favorite team: Liverpool. It is a bit of an obsession. Perhaps with good reason. On the pitch Per shines. With and without the ball he is creative, takes risks and is a leader. This contrasts with the classroom, where he is a quiet, tentative learner.

Per's parents are Passion Day skeptics, questioning the practice in general and Per's participation in soccer in particular. After past Passion Days you have received emails musing, "Wouldn't be better if Per participated in another activity: chess or robotics or music making. We want him exposed to new things. Isn't he too young to know his passion?" In the run up to this Passion Day you have received a fairly long email which reads, in part, "He plays soccer constantly. How can he develop new interests if he doesn't try something new...Can't you push him out of his comfort zone this time?"

Do you say yes or no to Per's passion?