



# ITERS-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 mobile children can use materials, equipment, space, and furnishings independently. Non-mobile children will likely need teacher assistance to access appropriate materials. Teachers can make materials accessible by moving non-mobile children to different areas and providing a variety of toys within their reach during play. Having access to materials and furnishings encourages independence and children's engagement. For these reasons, access to materials, equipment, space, and furnishings for specific times can be found in 14 items throughout the ITERS-3 – it's that important!

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

**Children are confined** – Children are kept in furnishings (e.g., Bumbo seats, bouncy seats, Boppy pillows, swings) that restrict their movement and prevent them from accessing materials freely.

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

**Limited materials** – Children are told which materials they can use, or certain centers or play areas are closed, limiting their ability to make independent play choices. Similarly, non-mobile children are not provided with a variety of materials during their play times.

**Extended outdoor play times**– If outdoor play lasts more than one-third of the observation, a wide variety of materials—beyond gross motor equipment—should be available to support children's play and learning.

Encouraging free play in early childhood, as highlighted in ITERS-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.**