

Facilitating Playful Learning in Grades K–2

Five ways early elementary teachers can bring an element of playfulness into classroom lessons.

By [Rachel Scheer](#)

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For many students in the early grades, especially those with limited access to unstructured or screen-free time outside of school, intentionally structured playful learning during the school day is essential. It supports academic risk-taking, deepens engagement, and builds the social and emotional (SEL) competencies that collaborative learning depends on. I have used five practical, teacher-tested ways to bring meaningful playful learning into my daily K–2 routine. These strategies support content learning, build community, and promote joy in the classroom.

Playful learning can help support social development, creative thinking, risk-taking, and collaborative problem-solving. It encourages hands-on exploration and provides multiple entry points for students to access academic content. It also reduces stress and anxiety, promotes inclusion, and boosts engagement—particularly for students who may not be as easily drawn in by traditional instructional methods.

Structure, rules, and routines don't take away from playful learning—they help make it possible. That's why each of the strategies below includes routines and structures designed to help students engage successfully and meaningfully.

1. Set Up Daily Choice Time With Intentional Materials

Create a daily, tech-free choice time—even just 15 minutes—when students select from options like puzzles, blocks, play dough, dress-up, and board games. Over time, introduce student-led learning stations with peer-taught skills—e.g., origami or drawing—or content-aligned choices like math and reading games.

Structure: Teach routines for choosing and rotating through activities, managing materials, and collaborating respectfully. Model and practice these expectations frequently, especially early in the year.

Outcomes: Approaching choice time in a structured way pays off when students apply their strengthened communication and collaboration skills to academic tasks. Choice time is highly engaging and motivating, in my experience.

2. Incorporate Social and Emotional Role-Play

When teaching social and emotional skills—either through a set curriculum or as real-life issues arise—incorporate pretending. For example, when I introduce conflict resolution, I teach students to use a sentence frame like, “It bugs me when...” or “I wish you would...” and have them act out common scenarios in pairs.

Structure: Consider pairing students who already demonstrate strong social and emotional skills with those still developing them to provide peer models during the learning.

Outcomes: Role-play helps students feel more confident using problem-solving language in real life, laying the groundwork for a more respectful and empathetic classroom culture.

3. Promote Imagination in Content Areas

I like to use props, guided imagery, and dramatic activities to bring academic content to life. When studying a Bengali forest ecosystem, my students built dioramas with clay models they could manipulate to simulate interdependent actions between organisms. When learning about the salmon life cycle, they acted out each stage as I read aloud a guided narrative.

Structure: Before students move around, model expectations for behavior, spatial awareness, and safety. Practice what it should look and sound like.

Outcomes: Imaginary playacting provides vivid, embodied experiences that help students internalize complex academic ideas—especially in science and social studies.

4. Use Props, Toys, and Loose Parts as Inspiration

You can expand on established choice time routines by introducing [loose parts](#) or props and materials tied directly to content-area learning. This can be open-ended—encouraging curiosity and creativity—or tied to specific units. Here are some examples:

- **Science:** Animal life cycle puppets, animal costumes, models (cell, solar system, water cycle, etc.), biome dioramas, collections (rocks, sand, feathers, etc.), natural loose parts (honeycomb, bird's nest, pressed leaves and flowers, etc.).
- **Social studies and SEL:** Globes, maps, play money, career costumes, pretend food, feelings cards, feelings, figures and dolls (including diverse physical appearances and abilities), city building and transportation toys, artifacts from students' home lives and cultures (money, costumes, flags, jewelry, etc.).
- **Math:** Cash register and play money, puzzles, base-10 blocks, Unifix Cubes, counters, 10 frames with loose parts (shells, pebbles, gems, etc.), pattern blocks.
- **English language arts:** Free-writing and book-making, Story Cubes, comic-making, magnetic letters, printed and laminated pages from read-alouds, puppets and figures for dramatic play and storytelling.

Structure: Model how to use materials responsibly, and cocreate routines for sharing high-interest items (e.g., sign-up sheets, timers).

Outcomes: These materials provide tactile, engaging entry points into academic content and allow students to make meaningful connections across subjects.

5. Have Students Get Creative

I also like to involve students in [designing parts of the environment](#). They might build backdrops for puppet shows, design storefronts, or assemble museum displays related to what they're learning.

Structure: Set expectations for group work, safety, and care of materials. Scaffold the planning and design process with mini-lessons and visual checklists.

Outcomes: Student-driven creation fosters ownership and excitement. When students help shape the tools and spaces for play, they see the link between academic learning and creative expression—making school a place they look forward to each day.

The Teacher's Role

Incorporating playful learning into the content areas isn't about adding one more thing to an already full plate—it's about reimagining how we engage students in deep, joyful, and inclusive learning. With the right tools, routines, and mindset, it brings a spirit of playfulness into classroom activities and becomes an integral part of learning.

In all of these practices, the teacher's role is not to step back but to scaffold, cocreate routines, and model problem-solving. The teacher can provide opportunities for student reflection and assist in making connections between play and academic content. With thoughtful facilitation, playful learning becomes a meaningful, standards-aligned tool for content instruction and community-building.