

Valuing play: The *Early Years Learning Framework* in schools

‘Learning can happen every moment of every day. It’s our job to make the most of every moment.’

The initial impetus for reviewing the program in our kinder was the perceived lack of time to interact with children individually or to observe their play and learning.

After revisiting what we know to be ‘best practice’ for young children by accessing current learning frameworks and approaches including Reggio Emilia, the *Early Years Learning Framework* and the work of Kathy Walker, we have put in place a ‘Project-based learning’ program.

The program supports the interests and needs of individual children through a play-based learning approach; it maximises adult interaction with children, enabling meaningful observations that inform future learning focuses and also reflects our high expectations for children’s individual achievement.

Change is not always easily accepted and—as with any new program—there are questions and concerns.

‘HOW WILL MY CHILD LEARN TO READ AND WRITE IF HE IS ALLOWED TO PLAY ALL THE TIME?’

The *Early Years Learning Framework* places the individual child at the centre of our core business and emphasises the power of play-based learning. We know that children learn more in the first four–five years than at any other time in their lives, so by the time they enter kindergarten they are learning experts. They achieve this by being immersed in the real world: watching, listening, playing, exploring and experimenting; learning through practice, trial and error with the support and guidance of sensitive adults and role models. To maintain some of this early learning momentum, we allow children to do what they do best.

However, to achieve deep and substantial learning, adults need to extend learning from children’s play. The role of the teacher’s assistant is crucial to the success of this program, as they are an extra adult in the room who can question children, challenge their thinking and support their learning.

Children learn best when the activity is interesting and has meaning for them personally. We have talked to parents about this and, with their help, children now arrive at school each morning with some news or ideas or interesting objects which we use as the ‘seeds’ for projects.

For example, Corey has been on a plane to Queensland and today he is building a plane for his friends. The teacher conversationally explores a range of questions such as:

- ‘What is your plane going to look like?’
- ‘Do you want to draw a plane?’
- ‘Should we label the plane?’
- ‘Will the plane be long enough for everyone to fit in?’
- ‘How can we find out?’
- ‘Do you need a team of friends to help you?’
- ‘Where will you travel in your plane?’
- ‘Let’s check the world map and plan your trip.’

It’s important to realise that all this happens in a conversation; the teacher doesn’t ‘fire questions’ at the child; rather, questions emerge as the child talks about their project and they muse together.

As a class, we have brainstormed a ‘Project procedure’ which is displayed as a guide for project work.

Of course, sometimes children come to school with no real project in mind at all—but learning still emerges out of play. For example, Stephanie, who had no project, asked, ‘Can I just play today?’ She picked up a clipboard and pencil, went over to her friend Abbey, asked her a question, recorded something and moved onto another child. She was checking to see who was going home on the bus.

The teacher supported this learning by handing her a name card. ‘Stephanie, is Jack going on the bus after school?’ Stephanie then went and asked Jack, wrote down his name and gave him a tick, and came back for another name card. At the end of the session she shared her bus list with the group and then took it to the school office.

Now that’s play with purpose.





‘DO THE CHILDREN JUST PLAY ALL DAY?’

We have two consecutive full days for each of our kinder groups. Our day consists of three blocks of time.

During the morning session we have a group meeting where we review the tools the children may need in their learning—counting, numbers, letters and sounds, writing and numeracy strategies. We may also have a group brainstorm activity to generate teacher provocations to be used when children require direction for their projects, or we might review our inquiry unit.

The children then pursue their own or team projects with adults monitoring, observing and interacting with the children to enhance the learning.

During the second block, children continue with their projects while the teacher observes and works with a particular focus group of six children. The teacher works with a different focus group each day.

The third block consists of planned learning activities based upon inquiry units or specific literacy or numeracy strategies.

Running this program over consecutive days has been fantastic for enhancing children’s learning as we are able to follow up on children’s projects, add resources or plan challenges or extensions.

‘WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN PLAY-BASED LEARNING?’

The *Early Years Learning Framework* recognises that all adults in the learning environment have responsibility for each child’s learning journey. It is in the interactions and conversations between adults and children as they are engaged in projects or play that learning is emphasised, enhanced and extended.

Reflection is central to our planning for learning. We continuously review our environment, our resources, our observations of children and our interactions with them to ensure equity and optimum opportunity for each child’s development. We are also constantly modelling learning strategies, including literacy and numeracy practices.

‘HOW ARE YOU SUPPORTING DEVELOPMENT IN LITERACY AND NUMERACY?’

We have moved away from planning ‘sound of the week’ or a ‘focus number’, towards generally immersing children in literacy and numeracy as a natural part of their project learning. I explicitly plan and model literacy and numeracy activities in addition to games and other activities.

We plan opportunities for children to read, draw or write in as many areas of the learning environment as possible so that they always have access to resources.

The results have been amazing; literacy and numeracy have become a natural part of their projects and the children have real purpose in their learning.

Every day we see evidence that play-based learning is a powerful tool in developing genuine interest in learning, building self-motivation and self-confidence and creating positive dispositions to support lifelong learning.

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References

Walker, K. (2011). *Play Matters: Investigative learning for preschool to grade 2*, (2nd edn). Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research.



Learning and teaching through play

Providing practical examples and questions to encourage critical

reflection, this book explores how to use play-based learning and teaching to promote the principles, practices and outcomes of the EYLF.

ECA Code: RIP1003

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