

Why play-based learning?

'... for the EYLF to be implemented properly, all early childhood educators need to know what play is, why it is important, how to implement and assess a play-based program and their role in it.'

QUESTIONING PRACTICE

The *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) is built on the understanding that the principles of early childhood pedagogy (DEEWR, 2009, pp. 12-13) guide the practice of early childhood educators. Research tells us that an educator's pedagogy is one of the most important aspects when assessing the quality of children's learning. So early childhood educators need to carefully consider and question their pedagogy and corresponding practices.

In implementing the EYLF, educators should discuss and describe their understandings of the practice principles. One of the practices most commonly used in the early childhood sector is 'learning through play'. Play-based learning is described in the EYLF as 'a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they actively engage with people, objects and representations' (EYLF, 2009, p. 46). But what is play? Play is hard to define as there are a number of theories and types of play. Can you describe play?



DEFINING 'PLAY'

While there is no one definition of play, there are a number of agreed characteristics that describe play. Play can be described as:

- **pleasurable**—play is an enjoyable and pleasurable activity. Play sometimes includes frustrations, challenges and fears; however enjoyment is a key feature
- **symbolic**—play is often pretend, it has a 'what if?' quality. The play has meaning to the player that is often not evident to the educator
- **active**—play requires action, either physical, verbal or mental engagement with materials, people, ideas or the environment
- **voluntary**—play is freely chosen. However, players can also be invited or prompted to play
- **process oriented**—play is a means unto itself and players may not have an end or goal in sight
- **self motivating**—play is considered its own reward to the player (Shiple, 2008).

Once you have decided what play means to you, you should next ask yourself, why play-based learning? What is it about play that makes it so important? Play has a long and detailed research history that dates back to the work of Locke and Rousseau. Research and evidence all point to the role of play in children's development and learning across cultures (Shiple, 2008). Many believe that it is impossible to disentangle children's play, learning and development.

BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

While research on brain development is in its infancy, it is believed that play shapes the structural design of the brain. We know that secure attachments and stimulation are significant aspects of brain development; play provides active exploration that assists in building and strengthening brain pathways. Play creates a brain that has increased 'flexibility and improved potential for learning later in life' (Lester & Russell, 2008, p. 9).

Young children's play allows them to explore, identify, negotiate, take risks and create meaning. The intellectual and cognitive benefits of playing have been well documented. Children who engage in quality play experiences are more likely to have well-developed memory skills, language development, and are able to regulate their behaviour, leading to enhanced school adjustment and academic learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2005).

FOSTERING PLAY-BASED PROGRAMS

Physically active play allows children to test and develop all types of motor skills. It promotes significant health and wellbeing benefits. Centres that were found to have a high-quality, play-based learning program incorporated:

- a daily schedule that included active indoor and outdoor physical play
- integration of music, movement and creative expression
- adult-child interactions that modelled moderate to high levels of physical activity (meaning that educators were at times as physically engaged in active play as the children) (Steglin, 2005).

Play does not happen in a vacuum; it is usually undertaken within a physical and social space (Lester & Russell, 2008). One of the greatest benefits of playing is to assist with the development of social competence. Children can build relationships, learn to resolve conflicts, negotiate and regulate their behaviours. In play, children usually have increased feelings of success and optimism as they act as their own agents and make their own choices. Playing is a known stress release; it is often linked to child wellbeing.

The dispositions for learning, such as curiosity, openness, optimism, resilience, concentration, and creativity (SACSA, 2009), are developed in play. Playing is linked to the development of resilience and the beginnings of empathy as children begin to understand other points of view. However, not all play is kind or inclusive, so educators have to act accordingly to ensure that play is not harmful.

WHAT EDUCATORS CAN DO

How can quality play-based learning take place effectively? Early childhood educators should know the children and families in their centre; they assess, document children's learning and know their interests. Then, together with families, they plan carefully how to use play-based activities as one tool to promote the learning that will achieve the EYLF outcomes.

Planning the environment to assist children to achieve outcomes is important in providing quality play experiences. The environment can be intentionally planned in four main ways:

- the physical environment—the physical layout of space, furniture and resources. Consider how you will construct and present activities and materials so they are arranged in provoking and inviting ways to encourage exploration, learning and inquiry
- the social and emotional environment—children need secure, warm and trusting relationships so they are confidently supported in their explorations and risk taking. Assist children to make connections with others, develop friendships and regulate their behaviours. Together, children and adults set the emotional and social tone of the environment

- the intellectual environment—there are times to leave children to play freely and times for intentional conversation, a well-placed question or query that will extend children's learning. Shared sustained conversations (Siraj-Blatchford, 2008) are the hallmark of effective early childhood educators
- the temporal environment—the way that educators decide to use the time available in the program. Children need large blocks of time to develop play themes and ideas.

Early childhood educators need to be articulate, to be able to justify clearly, provide evidence for and proclaim the benefits of play-based learning. The EYLF (2009) is based on sound, proven early childhood pedagogy and practice principles. However, for the EYLF to be implemented properly, all early childhood educators need to know what play is, why it is important, how to implement and assess a play-based program and their role in it.

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