

# Learning through play in early childhood settings

What is play? Play comes naturally to children and is important to children's learning and development and their sense of identity. Play takes many forms, occurs in a range of settings, indoor and outdoor, can involve one or more people, can be active or passive, has specific meaning and value to those participating in the play, involves thinking and can be rewarding and fun.

*“Play provides opportunities for children to learn as they discover, create, improvise and imagine. Play provides a supportive environment where children can ask questions, solve problems and engage in critical thinking. Play can expand children's thinking and enhance their desire to know and to learn (EYLF, 2009 p. 15)”.*

Studies throughout the world have shown that children learn and develop while they are involved in purposeful play based experiences.

Educators who work with children in early childhood settings such as; Kindergarten, Childcare, Family Day Care and Outside School Hours Care, plan a program to meet the individual



interests and needs of each child. Educators do this by providing a wide range of play based experiences in an open learning environment, where children can move freely between the indoor and outdoor spaces.

Educators generally use different teaching strategies to support all children to develop a love of learning, to be curious, inquisitive and interested in their world and the people they meet. Through play children can imagine, pretend, create, explore, investigate, communicate, question, talk, listen, think, feel, touch and smell. Play involves negotiating, problem solving, taking risks, trying new things, seeing how things work. They will learn about themselves and others learn the rules of play, make friends, develop relationships and trust the people around them, the educators and other children. Play gives children opportunities to celebrate, achieve, fail, succeed, make mistakes, practice, test new information or skills, form opinions and master new skills and knowledge.

Indoor and outdoor play experiences planned by educators that you can expect to see include: drawing, cutting and pasting with scissors and glue, using recycled materials, building with blocks, construction toys, jig-saw

puzzles, messy play, finger painting, digging in the mud patch, pretend cooking in the sandpit, play dough and clay, playing games, dramatic play, dressing up, puppets, painting, hammering, dancing, singing, climbing, jumping, running, skipping, listening to stories in English and other languages, story-telling, imaginative play, reading books, water play, gardening and much more.

Play is important for all children, it helps them to make sense of their world and continue to develop a strong sense of identity. Children will sometimes play alone, play with one or two other children and play in small or large groups of children. Play can be noisy or quite, passive or active.

Play provides the opportunity for physical development promoting children's confidence, strengthen large and small muscles and help to develop children's co-ordination.

Children use their imagination to act out what they have observed, for example: pretending to prepare meals or caring for a baby; being a fire fighter, a doctor; or a shop-keeper. This helps children learn to understand the different roles people play in the community.

Formal teaching and instruction of knowledge and skills to children before they are ready may result in children experiencing a loss of confidence, withdrawal, unacceptable behaviour or a feeling of failure. Learning through play allows children to learn at their own rate and gain the confidence knowledge and skills needed to attempt the more complex concepts and tasks.

When children move from the early childhood setting to primary school they will gradually move from play based learning to a more formal instructional model of learning.

Educators in early childhood settings use a range of teaching methods. There will be some directed activities in the service our child attends, which will be more formal, such as music, stories and discussion. For a large part of the day, children will be making decisions themselves about where they will play, who they will play with, and how long they will spend at a particular play activity. Educators provide support and guidance when children need help.

Wherever children decide to play, there will be some rules that will help them to learn behaviours that will be

acceptable to others. Rules help children to stay safe, to care for equipment and support fairness and equity. For example, children may make up rules for waiting for their turn on a swing. Allowing children to be involved in making rules will help their thinking and problem solving skills, communication and social skills as well as their numeracy and literacy skills. Rules need to be as simple as possible and suitable to the children's age and stage of development so that their purpose is understood.

In their play, children can build on their existing knowledge and ideas in new and interesting ways. For example, if water is poured onto dry sand, it will be absorbed until the sand can absorb no more, then puddles of water will form. Children can count the number of containers of water it takes to form a puddle. This can lead to valuable learning including the discovery of scientific and mathematical facts.

If we observe children at play, we see they are constantly alert, using their vision, hearing, touch and sometimes taste in learning about the world.

Children may repeat some activities



over and over, taking risks, learning and practising skills, such as climbing by themselves to a high place or mastering a jig-saw puzzle, putting on their own clothes or art smock, balancing on a narrow beam, using scissors all by themselves, hopping or pushing themselves on a swing. These achievements large and small are rewarding for the child, families and for educators supporting their learning.

Play provides children with opportunities to talk and ask questions, develop and practice vocabulary and language, literacy, numeracy and social skills. Through play, children are learning how to communicate and relate to other people.



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