

Learning Through Play in Early Childhood Settings

Resource for Families

What is play?

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

“Play is essential to stimulate and integrate a wide range of children’s intellectual, physical, social and creative abilities. Effective early childhood practices use integrated teaching and learning approaches to support sustained and shared interactions with children. Through play and other opportunities children learn to make sense of and construct ideas about the social and natural world, the people, places, objects and experiences they encounter every day.”

- VEYLDF, 2016, pg. 14

Play comes naturally to your child and is an important part of their learning and development. Play helps your child to make sense of their world and continue to develop a strong sense of identity. Through play, your child 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 and seeing how things work. Your child will learn about themselves and others, learn the rules of play, make friends, develop relationships and trust the people around them including their educators and other children.

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 quiet, passive or active.

“Periods of uninterrupted play give children time to invent, investigate and discover, using a rich variety of open-ended materials and resources.”

- VEYLDF, 2016, pg. 21

Learning through play

Teachers and educators plan a program to meet the individual interests and needs of each child who attends the service. They do this by providing a wide range of play-based experiences in an open learning environment, where children can move freely between indoor and outdoor spaces.

There will be some directed formal activities, such as music, stories and discussion. For a large part of the day, children will be making decisions by themselves about where they will play, who they will play with, and how long they will spend at a particular play activity. Educators will provide support and guidance when children need help.

Educators will use different teaching strategies to support children to develop a love of learning, to be curious, inquisitive and interested in their world and the people they meet. They may guide the play, lead the play, or observe children in self-directed play.

What are children learning during play?

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.

Children also use their imagination to act out what they have observed. For example:

- pretending to prepare meals
- caring for a baby
- being a firefighter, a doctor, or a shopkeeper.

This helps children learn to understand and make sense of their world and their community.

“Dramatic play is important for exploring different identities and points of view, including the notion of belonging to global communities. Children should be supported to appreciate similarities and differences between individuals and groups, and to respect different perspectives.”

- VEYLDF, 2016, pg. 18

While your child is engaging in play, they will negotiate rules to help them learn behaviours that are acceptable to others. For example, children may develop rules for waiting for their turn on a swing. Allowing children to be involved in making rules that help everyone stay safe, care for equipment and support fairness and equity, will help their thinking and problem-solving skills. It also supports their development of communication and social skills as well as their numeracy and literacy skills.

In their play, children can build on their existing knowledge and ideas in new and interesting ways. Children may repeat some activities over and over, taking risks and learning and practising skills such as:

- climbing to a high place by themselves
- mastering a jig-saw puzzle
- putting on their own clothes or art smock
- balancing on a narrow beam
- using scissors by themselves
- hopping
- pushing themselves on a swing.

These achievements, large and small, are rewarding for children, their families and for the educators supporting their learning.

Play gives children opportunities to celebrate, achieve, succeed, make mistakes, practice, test new information or skills, form opinions and master new skills and knowledge.

Play is how your child learns.

References

Department of Education and Training. (2016). *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework*. Victoria State Government.