

Research Digest **Standard 6 Play**



Promoting play requires that each child has ample time to engage in freely available and accessible, developmentally appropriate and well-resourced opportunities for exploration, creativity and 'meaning making' in the company of other children, with participating and supportive adults and alone, where appropriate.

Introduction

Play is one of the key contexts for children's early learning and development, and offers significant opportunities for both learning and teaching.

"Play at its best in education situations, provides not only a real medium for learning but enables discerning and knowledgeable adults to learn about children and their needs." (Moyle, 1989:xi)

The challenge for practitioners who work to support the young child's learning and development is to engage with the child's play in a way which enhances it and opens up new vistas of learning and fun.

In order for it to be enjoyable and beneficial, young children need to spend a significant amount of time within the setting engaged in play/exploration, and these and other playful activities should be central to the daily routine. An understanding of child development is central to the achievement of this, primarily as it provides a continuum on which the practitioner can determine what is developmentally appropriate in terms of play. While singing and rhyming may be used to engage in play with very young babies, for example, interactive story-time may be more developmentally appropriate for older children.

Another important feature of play is that it enables the child to explore, to be creative and to use her/his previous learning to make new meanings. Open-ended play items, for example, can be provided which lead the child to explore different properties in the environment, both indoor and outdoor.

The next section of the Research Digest considers these aspects of play and their relationship to quality practice, as well as providing research evidence around resourcing play and the importance of choice and interaction.

Recent Research

Play, learning and development

In play, children develop and demonstrate exploration, creativity, spirituality, imagination, experimentation, manipulation, expression of ideas, social and interaction skills, divergent and abstract thinking, and problem-solving capacities (Bruce, 2001). These skills are essential for the consolidation of learning and the construction of meaning and knowledge. Research has demonstrated that young children who are more engrossed in their free play (thereby demonstrating higher levels of motivation) manifest more cognitively sophisticated play than peers who are less engrossed. Furthermore, adults who demonstrate warmth and supportive responses positively influence task-directedness, organisation, sustained play activity and pride in personal achievement in young children (CECDE, 2005).

While children are biologically primed to play from birth, they need other people to trigger those biological processes (Bruce, 2001). Babies need sensitive adults who will not allow frustrations to develop. If the joy of play goes, it takes with it the potential for deep learning. Toddlers develop the capacity to engage in critical aspects of play; pretending, imagining, and creating props for play with role rehearsals. They begin to use symbols and develop mastery of new activities. Whereas struggle is an important feature of early learning, children who are always struggling will become reluctant learners if they do not get enough practice to gain the dexterity they need in order to enjoy what they have learnt. The enjoyment of writing stories has its roots in socio-dramatic play in which the child develops scenes with a story line and adventurous characters (Bruce, 2001). The literature further emphasises that 'structured' play should provide both security and intellectual challenge; these two factors are largely determined by the developmental appropriateness of the activities (CECDE, 2005). Children who learn actively from birth are more likely to have positive dispositions to learning. This has life long implications. These children are curious and interested in what they are doing and they experience fun, enjoyment and, with repetition, the

probability of success. They develop competence and subsequent confidence. Open, optimistic, risk-taking and resilient, they are intrinsically motivated to learn (French, 2007).

Resourcing play

David *et al.* (2002) have noted the 'one hundred languages' that children use daily to share and communicate their ideas playfully. These include singing, dancing, talking, story-making, painting, mark-making, patterns, building, animating puppets and other playthings, model-making, gardening, looking after animals, and so forth. Such playful activity needs to be encouraged at all stages of the day and not confined to specific periods – even routine activities can be done playfully.

If play is to be seen as a process that will promote learning and development, it must be of high quality (In-Career Development Team, 1998). Lack of resources – in the form of appropriate equipment and high pupil:teacher ratios – can result in a gap between child-centred curriculum provision and its implementation (Murphy, 2004). High quality play is nurtured by adults providing a resource rich and aesthetically pleasing environment (indoors and outdoors) where children are able to touch, manipulate, explore, and experiment with a variety of materials. Socio-dramatic play can be supported by both specific materials such as a train set or dressing-up clothes, or more open-ended items such as blocks or big and small boxes. The latter are more likely to support more imaginative and complex play scripts (In-Career Development Team, 1998).

Play is an extensive pathway to learning and as such, professional knowledge and expertise is critical in planning and engaging in playing, learning and teaching (Murphy, 2004). This involves practitioners developing informed insights into the styles and patterns of learning for each child; her/his preferences, needs, identities, friendships and interests, and extending their own knowledge about pedagogical processes and curriculum. Play provides a lens into children's minds, revealing meanings and patterns not evident in formal contexts. It can help practitioners to understand the meaning of play-based and child-initiated activities, to fine tune their provision, to help children to become



master players and to inform the co-construction of the curriculum (Wood and Attfield, 2005). The skill of the practitioner lies in fusing the developmental needs of children with the concepts and values required for progression in any area of learning. Curriculum plans need to be reflected on daily, to identify, for example:

- What the children learned that day
- How the specific needs of children were addressed
- What special interests can be built upon
- How each child can be helped to experience success tomorrow

Materials and activities offered will consequently prove to be more diverse, challenging, appropriate to the context of development and enriching in generating critical skills (French, 2003).

Choice and interaction

The importance of activity and first hand experiences (where children can touch, smell and taste as opposed to looking at photographs or plastic replicas) in supporting children's early learning and development is dependent on the adult's role in providing for and enriching this activity. Children must have access to a range of stimulating materials and experiences. Adults should provide children with learning opportunities for responsible choice and independence. Babies need access to objects to explore and discover their weight, smell, texture, as well as colour, in a safe environment. The adult is in a position, having carefully laid out the objects and checked for safety, to facilitate the child's exploration in freedom. Toddlers need more manipulative and creative materials, as well as equipment to climb, bounce on and slide down. Young children have increasing capacities for language and inquiry, a growing ability to understand another point of view, and are developing interests in representation and symbols, such as pictures, numbers and words, and are increasingly physically active (French, 2003).

The consensus in research has moved firmly towards learning and developing in collaboration with others, democracy between adult and child, as well as between child and child (French, 2007).

Children are born as social beings whose social competence is enhanced through being and playing with others ( Research Digest/Standard 14: Identity and Belonging). Manning-Morton and Thorp (2003) conclude that the adult is key in supporting play by:

- Developing appropriate and close relationships with continuity of care through key worker systems
- Being emotionally present
- Devising play experiences that support children's understandings of relationships and feelings
- Engaging in play sensitively and sharing care effectively with parents

Adults need to plan for play and the specific interactions required to appropriately scaffold children's learning (French, 2007). Moyles and Adams (2002) identified that although adults endorsed the educational benefits of play, they were unsure of their role and how to assess the outcomes of play. While acknowledging the challenges for adults in participating in play, the evidence is clear that children can gain self-confidence, self-esteem and self-knowledge by engaging with and being supported by adults. Responsive adults enter their play as co-participants rather than ignoring, limiting the activity, having a pre-determined goal, redirecting children from their activities, interrupting or dominating an activity. Children do not require adults to become like large children, but to respect the play situation, honour the evolved rules and remain connected in the play. Children need time for individual exploration and reflection and for one-to-one interactions, which is critical for later literacy. The play opportunities provided should support children's freedom, imagination, social learning and cognitive learning equally. The most effective pedagogy is both 'teaching' and providing freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities; therefore a balance of child-initiated and adult-initiated learning should be ensured. In essence, the pleasure of play is the natural vehicle for integrated holistic development and learning (French, 2007).

Implementing the Standard

The opportunities for play/exploration provided for a child should mirror her/his stage of development, give the child the freedom to achieve mastery and success, and challenge the child to make the transition to new learning and development. In order to determine if this is being achieved, the reflective practitioner needs to consider:

- The type of play the child is currently engaging in – is it functional, constructive, symbolic, imaginative or socio-dramatic play?
- The range of opportunities provided for the child so that she/he can fully explore this type of play (appropriate environment, meaningful interactions, curriculum, etc.)
- Whether or not these opportunities are giving the child a sense of control and of being competent

Interactions ( Research Digest/Standard 5: Interactions) are intrinsic to the relationship between play and learning and so, it is vital that each child has opportunities for play/exploration with other children, with participating and supportive adults and by themselves, where appropriate. To ensure that this is happening on a regular basis, the practitioner could reflect on the following:

- How often does she/he participate in play with the child?
- What form does her/his participation take?
- What strategies can be used to support and enable the child who may have difficulties 'gaining entry' to and sustaining play with other children, or who may be consistently excluded from play?
- Consider situations where a child may wish to play alone and how she/he may facilitate that or, conversely, determine it inappropriate

As evidenced by the research outlined in the previous section, play is not a discrete setting practice, but an extensive pathway to learning. As such, opportunities for play should not be 'incidental', but should be devised in conjunction with planning for curriculum/programme implementation. Furthermore, they should be adapted to meet changing learning and development requirements. Examples of how this may be achieved include:

- Considering how planning for learning through play accommodates the individual child, setting, local context and specific needs (special needs, disadvantage, linguistic needs, and so forth)
- Considering the frequency with which planning for play and curriculum/programme implementation is undertaken (daily, weekly, monthly or on a term basis)
- The management and evaluation of documentation and planning

Conclusion

From preparation to participation, play is a central context for a child's early learning and development. Children in the birth to six years age category are evolving their interpersonal skills. Considerable social learning is, therefore, involved in adapting to becoming part of a group ( Research Digests/Standards 13: Transitions and  14: Identity and Belonging). Play/exploration needs to be an integral part of this learning process and should, accordingly, form a major part of a setting's curriculum/programme.

The opportunities for play/exploration should be developmentally appropriate, while simultaneously challenging the child to make the transition to new learning and development. Play can, for example, facilitate imaginary worlds where new forms of social relations and new patterns of decision-making and power are explored.

If children are to become self-sufficient learners, they must

recognise that they can use space and resources for themselves. To that end, each learning area and activity in the setting needs to have plenty of relevant equipment and materials for the child ( also Research Digest/Standard 2: Environments).

Acknowledging that play in the early years presents a basis for the evolution of learning, the reflective practitioner can ensure the centrality of play/exploration within quality practice by identifying children's particular needs and appropriate adult responses. By doing so, the child is taught, supported and encouraged to engage in exploration, creativity and meaning-making processes in the company of other children, with participating and supportive adults and, where appropriate, alone.

Resources for Play

Bruce, T. (2001). *Learning through Play: Babies, Toddlers and the Foundation Years*. UK: Hodder and Stoughton.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2005). *Early Childhood in Ireland: Evidence and Perspectives*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

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French, G. (2003). *Supporting Quality: Guidelines for Best Practice in Early Childhood Services* (2nd ed.). Dublin: Barnardos' National Children's Resource Centre.

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Jones, L., Holmes, R. and Powell, J. (Eds) (2005). *Early Childhood Studies: A Multiprofessional Perspective*. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Manning-Morton, J. and Thorp, M. (2003). *Key Times for Play: The First Three Years*. Maidenhead and Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Moyles, J. (1989) *Just Playing? The Role and Status of Play in Early Childhood Education*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Moyles, J. and Adams, S. (2002). *StEPs Statements of Entitlements to Play; A Framework for Playful Teaching with 3-7-year-olds* (2nd ed.). Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Murphy, B. (2004). Irish Senior Infant Classroom Practice - A Case of Imaginary Play? (in) Horgan, M. and Douglas, F. (Eds.) (2004). *Children of the Global Village: Proceedings of the OMEP (Ireland) Conference 2004*. Cork: OMEP (Ireland), pp. 71-84.

Wood, E. and Attfield, J. (2005). *Play Learning and the Early Childhood Curriculum* (2nd ed.). UK: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Children's Books

Kubler, A. (1995). *Come and Play with Us!* UK: Oxfam/Child's Play International. [Picture book, introducing the concepts of sharing and inclusion in play].



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The National Quality Framework
for Early Childhood Education

