

Early Childhood Education Update

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LEARNING THROUGH PLAY (K-3)

This Update raises the significance and value of children's learning through a play based environment. Schools/teachers are invited to use the information to inform curriculum planning and to share information with the school community.

The importance of play

Play is fundamental to children's learning, providing opportunities for children to express their ideas and feelings and engage in explorations, imagination, experimentation and manipulation. Children need time to play. During this time, adults should interact with and observe children to support the play and maximise learning opportunities.

Play becomes increasingly complex as children learn and develop. All children are active learners and providing them with a variety of ways to learn, including play, promotes quality educational outcomes.

The importance of play is recognised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1991) and Early Childhood Australia's Code of Ethics (2007).

A play based learning environment enables children to:

- develop knowledge, skills and understandings about their world and provides opportunity for cognitive, physical and social/emotional learning and development. Learning in these areas does not happen in isolation but is usually part of a complex interplay within any play situation;
- make sense of their world. They construct knowledge about the physical properties of objects, their environment and their role in it;
- have fun and the opportunity to show what they know and can do;
- be involved in playful interactions;
- engage in exploring, manipulating, problem solving hypothesising, and divergent and other higher levels of thinking;

- develop literacy and numeracy concepts, e.g. imaginative play improves language development, comprehension, metalinguistic awareness and understanding the purpose of reading and writing (Roskos & Christie, 2000);
- develop knowledge and skills associated with logical mathematical thinking and concepts such as – number, seriation, classification, time and space and scientific reasoning by interacting with manipulative and construction materials;
- develop listening, attention and concentration skills. Children who are motivated stay engaged for longer periods stimulating brain functions and neural pathways;
- practice skills, apply knowledge and experiment with different approaches and materials;
- enhance social skills i.e. pretend play develops complex communication and conversational skills, turn taking and social problem solving such as negotiating, cooperating, risk taking and persuading;
- develop character traits and skills necessary for the 21st century i.e. self advocacy, confidence, creative thinking, flexibility, co-operative; and
- engage in physical activity. As children use their bodies they develop body awareness and refine gross and fine motor skills.



Absence of play

Despite the overwhelming evidence in support of play there appears to be an increasing absence of play from some children's lives. Contributing factors include:

- lack of understanding about the importance of play and what 'play based learning' looks like;
- pressure for young children to participate in formalised, highly structured educational settings and teachers feeling the need to defend the use of play as a valid learning strategy;
- an overcrowded school curriculum;
- an increasing trend to enhance children's readiness for schools;
- a belief that enrichment tools, programs and toys marketed to families are a requirement of good parenting and a necessity for appropriate development;
- children spending more time with video games, DVD's and television;
- fear about safety in outdoor environments such as the local park or front yard e.g. stranger danger; and
- busy lifestyles that can mean parents do not have the time or energy to play.

'Research shows play based learning is inclusive of all ages, stages of development and ability – and it's fun!'

Types of play

Educational theorists have developed a variety of ways of categorising play.

Categorisations include:

- *social play* – occurs when children play by themselves or with others. Within this category there are a number of types of social play including: solitary play, parallel play, cooperative play;
- *cognitive play* – there are four stages of play through which children progress and develop:
 1. functional play – the early stages of play in very young children i.e. body movements and repetition;

2. symbolic play - children pretend to be something else i.e. an animal, an object (plane) or another person (fireman). Children may substitute one object for another – building block for a car;

3. constructive play – involves manipulating materials to create and build things (sandcastle, block building) and explore the way things go together;

- *playing games with rules* - children play within the rules, either self made or pre-made;
- *informal play/free play* – occurs spontaneously and is determined by the interests of the children;
- *socio-dramatic play* - may include everyday realistic events where children express themselves, assume different roles and interact with peers, or fantasy play which may involve fairytale or superhero play; and
- *Rough and Tumble play* - may involve physical interaction between children, or adults and children such as play fighting and chasey. This is different to bullying or aggressive behaviours.

How can schools promote play?

- Support teachers to implement a play-based curriculum through whole school discussions at curriculum planning sessions, staff and performance management meetings.
- Provide information to parents on the value of a play based curriculum that develops children's intellectual, physical and social and emotional development.

- Share examples to encourage play both at school and at home in school newsletters, parent meetings etc. Include photographs and/or teacher observations. Use descriptors that inform parents of what is happening and the intended knowledge, skill and understanding achieved through the activity. The 'snapshot' of learning in the *Kindergarten and Pre-primary Profile* provides a template for recording observations.
- Provide parents with information on ways of balancing passive entertainment and play that encourages mental and physical activity.
- Encourage parents to select toys that promote imagination and active engagement e.g. ball, blocks, construction sets, dress up clothes, dolls, recycled material, clay, etc.
- Reinforce the importance of parent time with children. Engaging in spontaneous play can be fun for parents too.
- Provide ideas that parents can use at home and in the community with their children.
- Develop greater understanding of how children learn through play, how to plan a play based curriculum and when to intervene in children's play to move the learning to a higher level.
- Ensure play is part of the everyday curriculum and not something children only do when they finish an activity.
- Promote the value of play and articulate the learning outcomes to parents for literacy, numeracy, social, cognitive, creative and physical development.
- Provide rich, multi-sensory experiences that encourage exploration and risk taking within a supportive environment.
- Select experiences and environments based on the developmental needs of children. Involve children in these discussions and decisions.
- Create indoor and outdoor environments that are safe and inviting for *all* children.
- Recognise and respect cultural differences and contexts in which play occurs.
- Take an interest in children's play by becoming a co-player, guiding and role modelling, asking questions and encouraging children to learn from one another.
- Observe and record children's spontaneous play and play patterns.
- Encourage parents to get involved in their children's learning by observing children's play at home i.e. take a photograph. Host afternoons where parents can share their observations and learn more about play with other parents.

What can teachers do to promote play?

Teachers have a key role in engaging children in meaningful play. While children learn to play naturally, it is important teachers create rich learning experiences that extend, challenge and engage children. Children's play is full of opportunities for learning and extending knowledge. Providing opportunities for children to choose among well-planned, varied activities will increase the opportunity for them to learn what they need to know.



Websites

If you would like to learn more about supporting children's learning through play visit:

- <http://www.topmarks.co.uk/Parents.aspx> - Here you will find articles written by practising teachers designed to help support children's learning at home.
- <http://www.nncc.org/Curriculum/better.play.html> - Information for parents
- <http://www.acei.org/playpaper.htm> - Information article
- <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/119/1/182> - Information article
- <http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/> - This website provides a range of information about early childhood.

References

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Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Convention on the Rights of the Child* 20 November 1989. Available at: <http://www.unicef.org> Accessed December 2007

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Important dates

19 March 2008: 10am – 1pm *The Playgroup WA Multicultural Fun Day* is a free community event being held at Celebration Park, Rochester Circle, Balga. The day is targeted towards families with children aged birth to five years.

30 April 2008: 10am - 2pm Whiteman Park *The World's Biggest Playgroup Day* coincides with National Playgroup week in April. This free community event is a fun-filled day with lots of interactive activities, physical play and information for parents. Pack a picnic and join the celebrations. For further information on any Playgroup WA events please visit www.playgroupwa.com.au or contact Playgroup WA on 1800 171 882.

3 – 6 October 2008: Early Childhood Australia Biennial Conference – Canberra. *Children: A nation's capital – Investing in our children*

Did You Know...?

- *The Early Years Phase of Schooling (K-3) Guidelines* will be sent to schools in Term 1, 2008. These Guidelines provide information about enrolment, staffing, industrial and other operational matters specific to the early years.
- The Federal Labor's Plan for Early Childhood and their Early Years Learning Framework will include specific emphasis on play-based learning, pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills. For more information visit: www.alp.org.au/download/now/early_childhood_policy.pdf
www.alp.org.au/download/now/new_directions_in_early_childhood_education.pdf
- In January 2008 the new Department for Communities assumed responsibility for the development of the *Western Australian Early Childhood Agenda*. The *Agenda* will support co-ordination of the work of State, Federal Government and non-government agencies in relation to young children and their families.
- Information for Dads on Child Development and Play is available via: <http://www.meerilinga.org.au/Parenting/Dads%20in%20the%20Early%20Years/Information%20Sheets.aspx>
- The Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages is now unable to provide information on a child's date of birth to schools. They will only provide this information to a child's parent or legal guardian.