



Effective practice: Play and Exploration

Key messages

- Children learn through first-hand experience, in activities they have chosen.
- Play can involve a child playing alone, alongside another child, or cooperatively with another child, children and or an adult.
- Children are given opportunities to test their ideas, themselves, their relationships and materials.
- Play and exploration promotes brain development.
- Children and adults can make and learn from their mistakes.
- Play fosters imagination and flexibility of mind, promoting children's ability to be 'players' now and in the future.
- Children's competences and confidence are developed through play.
- Children are given opportunities to explore their fears and anxieties in their play.
- During play children's concepts, skills, attitudes and achievements are extended.
- Effective practitioners evaluate the extent to which they provide for all children's learning dispositions and to which the children are able to change the dispositional milieu of their setting.
- Rich, enabling environments, with sufficient and appropriate safe space and equipment, are provided.
- Practitioners should allow children to dictate the pace, length and focus of activities and any interventions should be subtly supportive.
- Loving, sensitive key people recognise and provide for babies' and young children's fascination with and curiosity about what is going on in their worlds.

What Play and Exploration means

Play and Exploration in early years settings means children are able to choose activities where they can engage with other children or adults or sometimes play alone, and during those activities they learn by first-hand experience – by actively 'doing'. They need sufficient space, time and choice with a range of activities, some of which have been planned and prepared by the practitioners on the basis of their observations of individual children's current interests, learning styles and stages of development.

Defining play has been acknowledged as difficult by many authors and researchers, some arguing that it is easier to say what play is not than what it is. Observing children playing might lead one to assume that play is any or all of the following: a social learning device; a cognitive learning device; a physical learning device; fun and freedom; therapy; occupation while adults are busy. Play is said to happen in societies all over the world and is recognisable in other species, particularly in the young.

The flexibility of play and of playful minds is currently being vaunted as the most suitable approach to future life in our fluid, multi-media, global society. Certainly in countries such as China, where early

childhood education and care has traditionally been quite didactic and formal, there is much interest in the education of young children through play (David and Powell, 2005). Knowing how to be a 'player' may be an important attribute and one that children can acquire only through experience. Play is a means of dealing with problems and of gaining control over one's life. It helps people of any age to be proactive and dynamic, autonomous learners rather than people to whom life happens (Moyles, 2005). Play helps young children to be competent learners who can make connections and who can create and transform ideas and knowledge, because they are imaginative and expressive.

Bruce (2001) suggests that free-flow play is coordinated, moves fluidly from one phase or scenario to the next and makes young children feel powerful and contented. She emphasises that:

'Children at play are able to stay flexible, respond to events and changing situations, be sensitive to people, to adapt, think on their feet, and keep altering what they do in a fast-moving scene. When the process of play is rich, it can lead children into creating rich products in their stories, paintings, dances, music making, drawings, sculptures and constructions, or in the solving of scientific and mathematical problems.'

(Bruce, 2001, p.46)

In free-flow play children:

- use first-hand experiences from life;
- make up rules as they play in order to keep control;
- symbolically represent as they play, making and adapting play props;
- choose to play – they cannot be made to play;
- pretend;
- sometimes play alone;
- play with adults and other children, cooperatively in pairs or groups;
- have individual play agenda, which may or may not be shared;
- are deeply involved and difficult to distract from their deep learning as they wallow in their play and learning;
- try out their most recently acquired skills and competences, as if celebrating what they know;
- coordinate ideas and feelings, and make sense of relationships with their families, friends, cultures.

(Adapted from Bruce, 2004, p.132)

Play also has the advantages that a child can move in and out of the play and they can pick up play narratives where they left off. They can recall and repeat earlier play bouts and this provides a starting point for ease in their next encounter with a familiar playmate, for example, another child, an older sibling or a grandparent. Play is also multi-layered. Children build on their earliest experiences, and often at the heart of the very complex play bouts of older children, one can glimpse the contributions of earlier encounters.

During play children may begin by exploring and experimenting with what interests them by looking about, listening to and taking in the smells of their home or early years setting, observing what goes on there and how the people in it behave. They may touch objects, move around the spaces, manipulate

things, ask questions, as if they are seeking answers to the question 'What does this do?'. This period of play and exploration has been called the epistemic phase (the gathering knowledge phase; Hutt et al., 1989) and it is typified by concentration and a serious facial expression. When children feel confident they have some knowledge they will move into a ludic phase of play (the fun phase), as if they are asking the question 'What can I do with this?'. Both phases are equally important and link to Piaget's idea of assimilation and accommodation, where new knowledge is at first absorbed into and often understood in terms of previous knowledge. Then all relevant knowledge is adjusted as it becomes clear that the new knowledge has brought a different, challenging perspective that means the old knowledge needs expanding or correcting.

Play and learning take place in contexts that are familiar to the children involved. They share experiences and understandings, talk and thinking with the other children and the adults who join in the play and explorations. Learning is a social activity (Vygotsky, 1978). Our ideas are shaped by interactions with people who are important in our lives, and together we co-construct our understanding of our world and how we live in it. For young children, understanding and making sense of the world is rooted in what they know and everyday events in their lives. It often includes incorporating stories and characters from books, videos and DVDs, games and TV (such as superheroes).

Play helps children come to terms with the underlying meanings people in different communities share:

'The most strenuous period of imaginative activity is that time in childhood when we play with the boundaries of our view of the world: sense and nonsense, the real and the fictive, the actual and the possible, all within the cultural domain we inhabit.'

(Meek, 1985, p.53)

Loris Malaguzzi, one of the founders of the now famous nurseries in Italy's Reggio Emilia region, argued that young children:

'Have the privilege of not being excessively attached to their own ideas, which they construct and reinvent continuously. They are apt to explore, make discoveries, change their points of view and fall in love with forms and meanings that transform themselves.'

(quoted in Edwards et al., 1998, p.75)

This ability of play and exploration to transform understandings can also be seen in how each child's individual brain is transformed. Play interactions at around the age of 18 months impact on brain development (Gopnik et al., 1999) as this is when most young children begin to realise their own mind is different from that of others. This is the time when they may start to use the word 'I' and to be aware that other people do not necessarily like what they like. Additionally, we often use the term 'play' to describe the recreational activities of adults and so we might think children's play is recreation. But we might also reflect that when very young children play, they are engaging in the creation of who they are and the beliefs they hold, not re-creation (David, 1996).

Why Play and Exploration is important

Play and Exploration is important because it offers opportunities for:

- making choices and decisions;
- using one's own ideas and imagination;
- experimenting;
- trying out new behaviours and practising old ones;

- practising skills and learning new ones;
- exercising, developing and coordinating body, mind and brain;
- adapting or transforming knowledge, attitudes and skills;
- negotiating;
- following an interest or line of enquiry;
- engaging in 'What if?' activity;
- making up rules and changing them;
- making mistakes;
- demonstrating one's competence in many areas of development;
- setting one's own goals;
- trying to emulate someone else;
- using symbols;
- making sense of puzzling situations, events or equipment;
- becoming and being confident and enjoying challenges;
- having fun with friends and/or familiar adults;
- learning how to be a 'player' fit for life in a high-tech, post-industrial society.

Effective practice in relation to Play and Exploration

Learning through experience

Children engaged in play and exploration are learning through experience, because young children's development and learning, whether physical, social, emotional, moral or cognitive, requires real, hands-on engagement – it cannot be done by means of a worksheet. In play, children can express their fears and re-live anxious experiences in controlled and safe situations. They can take risks and make mistakes, try things out and make sense of relationships.

Early years settings which effectively promote children's learning through play ensure that they offer a suitable, safe context for learning which includes a range of appropriate resources. There will be clear rules, discussed with the children, about how to access those resources, and encouragement to share and take care of them. Some settings will have limited storage space or finances, but children's imaginations are fired by simple resources which cost very little: dens made from old curtains (offering different textures, patterns, light penetration); large cardboard boxes (which can be painted or have doors and windows cut); catalogues (for example, from travel agents that, together with a couple of toy telephones and some stationery, can transform tables and chairs into a travel shop). Role-play areas, equipped with some items of dressing-up clothes and other easily obtainable materials, allow children to take on and rehearse new and familiar roles.

Each child comes to an early years setting as an individual with a unique cultural background and range of experiences. Children's initial choice among play activities is likely to be influenced by those familiar

experiences and the confidence they have gained from them. With adult support and stimulation and from watching and then joining other children, they will gradually extend the range of activities in which they engage. Some older children may be more butterfly-like when they first attend a setting, wanting to try everything. As they become more confident and competent, all children in a well-run setting will settle down and spend extended periods of time in self-chosen play and exploration.

Adult involvement

Play comes naturally and spontaneously to most children, but some need adult support, perhaps because they lack confidence and do not yet feel comfortable in the setting, or because they have never experienced some of the toys or activities on offer. Children who have been urged to keep themselves clean (buying, washing and drying clothes is a big problem for some families) may need encouragement to become involved in messy play with sand, water, clay or paint. It may help if the child witnesses the practitioner talking about these activities in a friendly and supportive way with parents, explaining how they plan to ensure the child's clothes are not soiled.

Practitioners need to plan and resource a challenging environment where they can support and extend children's play. This can be achieved by sensitive observation and appropriate intervention, being aware that it is sometimes important not to interrupt when children are deeply involved in their learning through play. Deciding when and how to intervene can be a difficult skill to develop and requires sensitive observation and reflection before intervention.

Allowing children to be spontaneous and to direct their own play activities and then sometimes joining them, but on their terms (not taking over and directing), requires experience, along with a deep trust in the children themselves and in one's own knowledge base. That knowledge base is a mix of personal life experience, professional life experience, knowledge from courses, mentors, from reading books and journals, from sharing ideas with colleagues, attending conferences, and so on. It is also informed by learning from children, their parents and grandparents. It may be knowledge about individual children, families, different cultural, religious and linguistic traditions, child development and other theories or research.

Some early years practitioners are afraid that if the words 'education' and 'teaching' are used in relation to early childhood provision, they imply formal, adult-directed teaching. It is important therefore to explain that the root of the word 'education' means 'to lead out' and in freely chosen play, sometimes with an adult's involvement, this is exactly what is happening. Similarly, teaching in this context is subtle. It is definitely not about filling young children's heads with facts or formally instructing them in skills, although sometimes they may want to know facts about topics that interest them and may request help in acquiring skills. It is about observing what a child can do and what they are trying to achieve next, sensitively scaffolding the subsequent steps in the child's learning, and warmly celebrating this.

Until recently, although play was advocated as the most effective approach in early childhood education and care, there was no British research which actually proved this. The existence of pre-set learning goals which are to be attained hampers practitioners' ability to adopt a play approach, because many will not feel confident that this can be done, and others interpret such prescription as meaning they must teach children using formal methods in order to achieve the goals. Effective practitioners are able to adopt play regimes, so provision is informal and the children learn mainly through self-chosen play activities. These practitioners are formal in their planning but informal with the children, using their observations of children's play to note what children have achieved and which pre-set goals have therefore been covered.

Research for the *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project* (EPPE) (Sylva et al., 2003) has now confirmed the centrality of play in early learning. The project concluded that there needs to be an appropriate balance of adult-directed activities (which may be playful but which are not true play because they are instigated and managed by adults) and children's self-chosen play, and that learning is promoted through shared, sustained thinking and conversation.

Children need time to explore resources and equipment (engage in epistemic play) before practitioners challenge them to use the resources to solve a particular problem. The experience gained helps them to feel familiar with the resources and thus to be more likely to solve the problem successfully. During their interventions practitioners can develop children's language and extend their ideas. Sometimes this will require the practitioner to remind the children how they solved a similar problem before, or hint at other useful resources, encouraging them to be conscious of previous learning, knowledge and thinking. These processes are called 'metacognition'.

Additionally, effective practitioners can learn a great deal about children's developing thought processes by working closely with parents and enabling them to understand children's actions during play, which indicate they are working on certain 'schemas' (Athey, 1990; Nutbrown, 2006) or developmental patterns. They can then provide appropriate play equipment and tune in to the child's fascination.

Effective practitioners evaluate the range and purposes of the play activities they provide and how different children are involved in them. They reflect on whether all the children engage in activities intended to foster learning in all areas of development and may suggest to colleagues (in a group setting) that certain children need extra encouragement to try particular equipment or tasks.

Play can enable children to have a voice (Duffy, 2005), as long as the adults are sensitive to ways in which certain children could be being silenced by a free play regime. It has been argued that play is used by some societies to prepare children for life in particular contexts and to foster conformity. Research has shown that this criticism can be true. Practitioners need to be aware of the possible misuse of play (Brooker, 2005), and should observe, reflect and act on their insights. It is important they intervene in play if it is racist, sexist or in any other way offensive, unsafe, violent or bullying.

Contexts for learning

Children do not separate their experiences into play and learning since they learn as they play and can have fun while they learn; there are therefore many contexts for children's learning. Recognising that different contexts encourage different types of play and exploration is a key factor in providing suitable experiences to support both children's transient and long-term interests.

Sometimes children may be inspired for a short time after hearing an ambulance, police or fire engine siren, to explore sound and movement, or to look for resources, such as walkie-talkies or helmets to take on the roles of these professions.

At other times children may have long-term interests in things such as machinery seen daily on their way to the setting, or in building structures or in caring for a baby or pet. When children show such long-term interests practitioners can capitalise on the opportunities offered by inspiring children's investigations, providing further ideas or resources and recognising that children need time to explore at their own speed. For some children this may be for a whole week, perhaps finding out about how things move when banged, or beaten, while for others, interested in mini-beasts, for example, it may be for much longer, becoming a lasting focus of their interest.

Not all children will express a strong interest in exploring a particular thing and some will benefit from being encouraged by adults. Where this is the case it is important both to build on routine activities and to capitalise on new experiences. This may include talking to children, looking at books or reading stories about the focus, finding a particular resource or supporting their interest in some other way, such as arranging a visit. It is also important to challenge stereotypes so that children learn that in their play and exploration there are no barriers to the many possibilities that arise.

Dispositions for learning

Furthermore, drawing on Margaret Carr's (2001) work in New Zealand, we can use the idea of learning dispositions to understand what makes a baby or young child's access to the learning experiences in an early years setting easy or difficult for them. Practitioners who recognise and value what and how children learn at home will help them understand the ways in which they may be creating barriers to learning for some children. This was particularly obvious in a research project (Tizard and Hughes, 1984) that discovered that boys from socio-economically disadvantaged homes made little progress because they spent a lot of time on the wheeled outdoor equipment at their nurseries. This was their activity of choice but as staff merely monitored outdoor play and did not engage with any of the children, the boys did not move on in their learning, nor widen the areas of development in which they engaged.

Carr proposes five domains of learning dispositions:

- taking an interest;
- being involved;
- persisting with difficulty or uncertainty;
- communicating with others;
- taking responsibility.

She then analyses the domains as three parts: being ready; being willing; and being able.

Similarly, work in Belgium (Laevers, 1994) and in the UK (Pascal et al., 1995) describes involvement and well-being as central processes in learning. Deep involvement and becoming 'lost' in an activity which has its own rewards links free-flow play to the idea of dispositions.

Each early years setting is a dispositional milieu: a place that presents children with particular views of what it means to learn and be a learner. Children will fit in and thrive in a milieu, or they may avoid, resist or try to change that milieu. The type of learners children become will be influenced by the environment. Effective dispositional milieu are said to be characterised by challenging activities that invite involvement, provision for children to make choices and share responsibility – meaning the children are powerful, competent members of a learning community of players who share ideas and roles. Further, effective dispositional milieu celebrates diversity, and values different cultural approaches to play. The practitioners are flexible and go with the flow of the children's play, delighting in spontaneity but still able to recognise and reflect on what the children have achieved.

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Further resources

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