

What is play and why is it important for learning?



ECE resources

What is play?

Play is multi-faceted, complex and dynamic, eluding easy definition. It is usually felt to be a universal activity and children are often portrayed as having an inherent desire and capacity to play.

Play has been defined as an activity that is:

- characterised by engagement and enjoyment, with high levels of involvement, engrossment and intrinsic motivation
- imaginative, creative, and non-literal
- voluntary or freely chosen, personally directed (often child-initiated) and free from externally imposed rules
- fluid and active but also guided by mental rules and high levels of metacognition and metacommunication (communication about communication) which give it structure
- process-driven rather than product-driven, with no extrinsic goals

Play can take different forms, with common categories that can and do overlap within an given episode of play. These include exploratory play with objects, physical play, pretend, fantasy or dramatic play, games and puzzles and other play involving explicit rules, constructive play (including artistic and musical play), language play (play with words and other features of language such as rhyme) and outdoor play.

Play can also be categorised in relation to the relative amount of power and control afforded to the players:

- Free or 'pure' play: Children have all the control, and adults are passive observers
- Guided play: Teacher-child collaboration, with the child's interests foregrounded
- Playful teaching: The teacher is in charge

These three kinds of play are associated with different outcomes and are relevant to teachers in determining the kinds of play, or combinations of kinds of play, to offer within school and early childhood settings.

What is free play?

Free play is **child-initiated and child-directed**. Children choose their activities and focus, enabling unconstrained freedom of expression and open-ended interactions with their environment. Play is initiated, sustained and developed by children, free of adult influence, although this does mean that it focuses on ideas, content and language that are already familiar and known to children. Some researchers question the extent to which free play is truly free, as children's choices about what, how, where and with whom to play may be influenced by the play environment and its associated rules and boundaries (which are controlled by adults), and the choices of others about what to play. Gender, ethnicity, social class and disability may also affect their patterns of participation.

What is guided play?

Guided play (also called 'scaffolded play' or 'mutually directed' play) is **child-centred and goal-directed**. Guided play invites children's active engagement, free exploration and direction of play, but also has clear learning goals so that play behaviours are limited in useful ways and distraction is reduced. Children's initiatives, reflections, choices, and creativity are important as a context for teachers to extend children's knowledge, understanding and skills. They allow teachers to naturally integrate desired learning outcomes with children's play and infuse play with new and unfamiliar content and ideas. Teachers are sensitive and responsive to children's interests and interactions while maintaining a focus on learning goals through deliberate, purposeful, and intentional teaching strategies. These might include commenting on discoveries, offering feedback, demonstrating use of equipment, reinforcing specific vocabulary or helping the child explore new strategies for problem-solving, within the context of the activities that children are constructing.

Teachers also initiate and co-construct play with children. They might design a learning activity that incorporates a child's specific interest, or choose themes and contexts for dramatic play that is based on children's interests or significant events and links to specific learning objectives. Teachers and children collaboratively design the context of the play, including the theme and its resources, and then children develop their play within the rules and actions of that context.

What is teacher-directed play?

Teacher-directed play involves **teacher-determined activities, outcomes and modes of engagement**. Teachers use a playful, engaging manner to develop children's academic skills and knowledge, focusing on playful learning processes, fun and enjoyment, and the use and development of children's creativity to invite children's active engagement. However, unlike free and guided play, teachers retain tight control over what occurs, outlining specific rules of play for children to follow, specifying how children are expected to engage in the activities, and generally structuring activities within a given time frame to ensure specific learning outcomes.

The development of play

During early childhood, children's play becomes increasingly complex, involving high levels of organisation and requiring increasingly sophisticated social, physical and cognitive skills. Although all children engage in a range of different play types, some are more prevalent at different ages. Infants and toddlers engage in exploratory and social play (such as 'peek-a-boo'). Exploration precedes play, and is a time of gathering information and discovering the properties and attributes of an object, situation or idea. Toddlers develop 'functional play' involving the repetition of particular physical actions and early pretend play.

With the development of imagination, older children engage in constructive play, pretend play and language play. They demonstrate increasing problem-solving skills, language, and collaboration, and show increased attention to processes, structures, and outcomes. They are highly intentional in their activity, and better able to combine and use materials in more complex ways. Sociodramatic play, involving cooperation and the coordination of play between two or more children, usually begins when children are 4 or 5 years old, and is cognitively demanding as children simultaneously hold in mind what they have negotiated for their role and character, the other children's characters and what has been agreed as the plot, as well as what different objects represent.

Does play lead to effective learning?

Research into the effectiveness of play for supporting children's learning is complex, given contrasting definitions and conceptualisations of play and its different types, the overlap between play types, and

outside influences on play such as the environment or structuring and involvement of adults. Play is a complex activity with many integrated dimensions that each have a potential impact on children's outcomes, making it difficult to separate out play as an influence on learning. Play may include particular kinds of adult interactions, or engage children in specific content, and it may be these features of children's play that are responsible for learning gains, rather than play itself.

The current research does not make it possible to determine whether play is crucial to development, whether it is merely one way to promote development alongside others which may work as well or even better, or whether play is a byproduct of other capacities that are the actual source of children's learning and development, such as social intelligence or language skill. Many studies of the impact of play on learning are found to have methodological weaknesses and there is a lack of replication of findings between studies that have small and relatively homogeneous samples. Some of the research findings directly conflict each other, and lead to opposing recommendations for practice.

However, much of the research concludes that play is a powerful learning mode and central to children's learning. Play integrates children's experiences, knowledge and representations in order to help them create meaning and sense and to understand the world. Pretending requires children to think of things that are not actually present, a skill required in many learning and life situations. The impact of play is multifaceted, supporting cognitive, emotional, social and physical development including:

- **Benefits for well-being**, including higher self-efficacy, higher expectations for one's success, intrinsic motivation, and positive attitudes towards the early childhood setting or school.
- **Academic/cognitive benefits**: play supports exploratory skills and discovery, the use of abstract thought and symbols, communication and oral language skills, verbal intelligence, imagination and creativity, and reading, writing and mathematics. Play also encourages important learning dispositions, engagement and participation and the integration of different cognitive processes. Play develops self-regulatory executive function skills (such as controlling attention, suppressing impulses, flexibly redirecting thought and behaviour, and holding and using information in working memory), metacognitive skills and problem-solving.
- **Social and emotional benefits** including social skills such as making friends, empathy, expressing emotion, and conflict resolution. Play can also build resilience.
- **Physical benefits** in terms of the development of large and small body muscles and motor skills, while the physicality of play is associated with improved cognitive function, behavioural and cognitive control, and academic achievement.

Is one kind of play pedagogy more clearly linked to positive outcomes?

Both free play and more guided and directed approaches are found to foster achievement. In general, research that focuses on developmental outcomes finds free play significant, whereas research that focuses on academic outcomes finds guided and teacher-directed play more effective. However, some research comparing play-based approaches finds no significant difference in children's learning through free play, guided play and teacher-directed play.

Free play has been found to support a number of more general learning outcomes. It supports:

- socioemotional development, particularly self-regulation, and social skills
- creativity and imagination
- problem-solving and persistence

- engagement in literacy activities (where literacy materials are embedded in play scenarios and environments)
- general cognitive development (through activities such as planning, problem-solving and comprehension)

Free play may be less useful for learning content, developing key concepts, or for supporting children to focus on important dimensions of new learning. Free play can vary in quality, lack challenge and limit learning opportunities. The research suggests that free play, while still important for a range of less measurable outcomes, is best complemented by high quality scaffolded and guided play in which teachers are involved.

Research indicates that guided discovery approaches are more effective than free or unassisted play for supporting more specific learning outcomes. Guided play is found to

- better support science learning, and language, literacy and mathematics outcomes
- improve vocabulary and support greater engagement in social interactions
- foster literacy and mathematics skills and general learning of content
- support higher levels of creative and flexible exploration and more effective problem-solving
- improve self-regulation skills such as inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility

Teacher-directed play in the form of carefully designed and challenging activities that include free choice, practical and intrinsically motivating tasks, and peer interactions is consistently associated with positive outcomes. Research reports that teacher-directed play:

- supports literacy skills, mathematics and general academic learning
- improves children's mathematical learning gains (with greater gains for children learning through card and board games than children experiencing more formal training)
- increases children's affect and engagement through the addition of a play component to learning experiences

Overall, child-centred and playful learning approaches are more likely to foster academic improvements that are sustained than traditional, formal approaches, but some research finds that children are more likely to learn content in teacher-led contexts. It is important to consider the information and skills to be learned when determining the most effective approach for learning through play.

A note of caution: Critical views on the use of play pedagogies

While there is much rhetoric around the importance of play for young children's learning, in these discourses play can sometimes be romanticised, while descriptions of play in curriculum documents can be reductive and fail to acknowledge the complexity of children's play experiences.

Some researchers critique the elevated status of play as a pedagogy for learning. They argue that:

- **Learning can be supported in diverse ways**, and play need not form the only catalyst for learning. Play is a cultural phenomena that is highly dependent on adult mediation and engagement. Where adults encourage pretending and other playful forms, children engage in these behaviours, but in other contexts where pretending and play are not encouraged, children learn in other ways, such as through real life tasks, storytelling, and organised games.

- **Children’s play repertoires and experiences vary**, and richly resourced, free play environments that reflect Western perspectives on play may not resonate with culturally diverse families. Children may be disadvantaged by approaches that emphasise independence, self management and free choice if these are inconsistent with home expectations, or if they have limited prior experience of play themes or the complex social processes required.
- **Children may not be able to express their interests and needs through play activities.** The freedom to choose may offer some children an advantage over others.
- **Play is not value-neutral.** Because of the unequal power relations between teachers and children, play can never be ‘free’. The use of play as pedagogy for the early years privileges particular (Western) constructs about children and ways of learning, in terms of ideas about appropriate play, which are then used to regulate children’s behaviour. In these ways play reinforces children’s positioning within social hierarchies including those of gender and race.
- **Play can be cruel**, involving teasing, pranks and playing tricks. It can also be characterised by self-interest, and exploitation and manipulation of situations, which is another way in which some children can experience loss of agency.

Further Reading

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