

Learning Through Play

Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009) reaffirms our long held belief that children learn through play. In play children can:

- explore, create, improvise and imagine
- learn about friendships and how to negotiate with others in social situations
- learn, practise and master skills
- engage in problem solving, test out ideas, ask questions and build new understandings
- gain deep satisfaction and knowledge from following their own interests
- exercise freedom, choice, decision making and agency
- create stories about their experiences and their identities.

What is play?

Researchers identify the special characteristics or features of play as:

- voluntary- children choose freely to play
- pleasurable
- engaging
- symbolic-play has elements of pretending or make-believe
- meaningful for the child
- active
- process oriented-play is often about *doing* rather than producing something
- intrinsically or self motivating activity-children don't need to be rewarded to play
- flexible-children change materials, scenarios, scripts and characters as they play

These features of play help children build the knowledge, skills and dispositions that will support them as learners in school and beyond (Kennedy & Barblett 2010, p. 4).

What is the educator's role in play?

Play based learning does not mean an 'anything goes approach' where educators set up the environment but are not actively involved. Early childhood educators take on many roles and use a range of strategies to support children learning through play by:

- engaging in sustained shared conversations to extend children's thinking as they play
- providing a balance between child initiated and led learning and adult initiated learning
- creating indoor and outdoor learning environments that encourage children to explore, solve problems, create and construct
- allowing large blocks of uninterrupted time for play
- observing, documenting and assessing play as they analyse the learning taking place
- intentionally teaching through encouraging, questioning, mediating, sustaining, extending, and resourcing
- making decisions about when to be in or out of the play

- reflecting on play by thinking about challenges, improvements, professional learning, and how to advocate for play
- differentiating the play so that every child can have meaningful participation in play.

Learning through play in outdoor environments

Children are disappearing from the outdoors at a rate that would make them top of any conservationist's list of endangered species if they were any other member of the animal kingdom. Contact with nature maybe as important to children as good nutrition and adequate sleep (Child Care Information Exchange, April 2006).

The EYLF places special emphasis on the importance of outdoor play spaces and the potential for learning that these spaces can provide. The EYLF identifies the features of these spaces as places where children can:

- enjoy and connect with natural elements including plants, trees, edible gardens, sand, rocks, mud and water
- learn about safe risk-taking
- gain an appreciation of the natural environment
- develop environmental awareness and learn about sustainability and conservation issues
- engage in active, vigorous physical and mastery play
- make choices and play independently or with others
- play with open-ended materials that invite interest and offer many possibilities for imaginative, creative play.

While outdoor play spaces are generally within the grounds or environs of a service, educators can also plan play experiences that utilise local outdoor spaces including parks, community gardens, reserves, or local bushland. The EYLF supports planning for children to connect with and participate in their local communities (Learning Outcome 2).

Powerful play materials

There are play materials or resources which are 'powerful' because they support children's learning in different ways. Can you identify the 'powerful' play materials that you provide for children in your setting? For example, clay is a powerful play material because it:



- is open-ended and flexible
- supports creativity and imagination

- provides a strong sensory experience
- can be played with by individuals or by pairs or a small group (see above image)
- can be used as a 'process' (the doing) experience and a 'product' experience (making something to be used)
- can be used by different age groups from unskilled to skilled players
- provides an experience with a natural material than can be re-used and conserved.

Play resources and references

Childcare Information Exchange--www.childcareexchange.com

Early Childhood Australia-www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eylfp/p/

FKA Children's Services—www.fka.com.au

PSC Tasmania- www.psctas.org.au

Elliot, S. (ed.) 2008. *The outdoor play-space naturally: For children birth to five years*. Pademelon Press: Melbourne.

Kennedy, A. & Barblett, L. 2010. *Learning and teaching through play*. Research into Practice Series, 17 (3), Early Childhood Australia: ACT.

Miller, E. & Almon, J. 2009. *Crisis in the kindergarten: Why children need to play at school*. www.allianceforchildren.org

Shipley, D. 2008. *Empowering children: Play-based curriculum for life long learning*. Nelson educational: USA.