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Introduction

Why play is important in the early years - an introduction for parents and practitioners

Play is what babies and young children do; they need no introduction to get them to play as it just comes to them, naturally. As adults we can forget about how wonderful it was to play when we were children; perhaps our play was valued by our parents and they supported our play with interesting playthings or by getting involved with us. Or maybe our parents saw play as idling our time, believing we must be directed to more important things in order to prepare us for school and the big wide world, where we need to be prepared to compete and survive.

Perhaps we should start by attempting to define play. Play can be described as a human activity that is freely chosen, is intrinsically motivated (that is, driven from an inner desire) and is personally directed. It is pleasurable and enjoyable, but may also be challenging and rigorous. It has no pre-defined objective or purpose, yet it has a positive effect on all aspects of development, as well as helping to deal with stress and develop resilience.

Play is not the same as playing games, as games have structures and rules. Children can and do enjoy structured games, but the appeal is different from the kind of free-play that is characterised by total absorption and immersion. This kind of play has been called 'free-flow play' and is discussed in more detail in chapter three. Free-flow play involves entering imaginary worlds where possibilities are infinite, and flow with the ebb and tide of the child's creative mind. Play has been described as a form of meta-intelligence that has a dynamic effect on the development of all aspects of human intelligence. The human capacity for play may even be the reason why human beings can achieve such high levels of intelligence, as play helps promote the plasticity or flexibility of the brain's structure and its capacity for complex and abstract thought.



Play and the Early Years Foundation Stage

Play is the prime means by which children learn. This is recognised by the Government and is the basis of the Early Years Foundation Stage, a statutory framework for learning and development, which was introduced in 2008 in England. Similar frameworks exist in the other countries of the UK and apply to all settings caring for children from birth to six.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is based on 4 key themes and their respective commitments.

A Unique Child	Positive Relationships	Enabling Environment	Learning and Development
Child development	Respecting each other	Observation, assessment and planning	Play and exploration
Inclusive practice	Parents as partners	Supporting every child	Active learning
Keeping safe	Supporting learning	The learning environment	Creativity and critical thinking
Health and well-being	Key person	The wider context	Areas of learning and Development

The Early Years Foundation Stage sets out to ensure that all children receiving non-parental care are in high quality environments, where their learning and development is of paramount importance, reflecting their entitlement to fulfil their true potential.

At the heart of the key themes and commitments are fundamental principles about ensuring children learn through well thought out and effective provision for play. Knowledge of child development is essential for practitioners, as well as forming positive relationships with children and parents and ensuring the environment covers all aspects to ensure children can feel safe, learn and make progress.

In the above table, the three main commitments for Learning and Development incorporate the following aspects that are based on theory and research to ensure that this approach is securely rooted in the best information available about how children learn.

The importance of physical activity

Physical activity is important for young children. The early years are a time of rapid physical growth and development of physical skills that incorporate strength, agility, co-ordination and balance. Physical play promotes exercise of every part of the body, far more than programmed activity lessons. The development of large muscles is as important as the development of fine muscle dexterity and co-ordination and the two are closely linked; children need to develop their large muscles before the finer co-ordination that they will later need for writing and finer dextrous tasks. At a time when there is increasing evidence that children are spending too much time in front of the television or play station and are prone to unhealthy diets, giving rise to concerns about the growth in obesity, heart disease and other health problems, we cannot ignore the need to ensure our children, from the youngest age, have lots of opportunity to play outdoors, whether in settings or with parents in the garden, open spaces or community facilities.

Children learn new skills all the time and outdoors offers endless possibilities to explore, practice and perfect them, as well as take measured risks in finding out just how high you can jump, or not, as the case may be. They learn to use equipment, such as climbing frames, but also to ride bikes or scooters, push along toys or throw and catch a ball.

Physical activity promotes each of the areas of learning on the Early Years Foundation Stage. It allows children to play physical games with friends, learning to take turns and be considerate, or play

imaginative games, using the outside world to inspire dramatic play involving co-operation and decision making. It can allow children to 'let off steam', to find physical expression for pent up feelings or frustrations. More than anything, it allows children to feel the joy and freedom of being outside in a large space.

Children use a great deal of language in their outdoor play and they can communicate in different ways. Outside they can use 'big voices' and can yell or squeal as much as they like. The environment itself provides lots of scope for literacy. Paper and pens can be taken outside to draw, record or write in big pictures and the built environment - shops, stations, public buildings - show many ways in which print, logos and symbols are used to communicate information in the adult world. On a warm, summer day nothing takes the place of a story and a drink somewhere cool in the shade, or singing loud songs with lots of actions to warm up on a chilly day. Children may take photos of where they go and what they see, and may like to make a book, with or without words, to look at later and retell their experiences.

Being in large spaces helps children to develop spatial awareness, to begin to order their local environment, knowing the way here or there. Some children develop their interests in cars or work vehicles by seeing them outside, learning the differences between them - their colours or shapes - and counting them as they wait for traffic lights to change.

Promoting creativity and learning

All children use their imagination to inspire their creativity when they play. Being creative involves using familiar things, or sometimes not so familiar things, using them in new and different ways that create new and different results. So, being creative also involves being experimental in order to find out what something can do when you use it in one way or another. Children start being creative from the time when they are babies.

What should the essentials of toy resources at home or setting comprise? Of course this depends on the child, their age and interests, but some general guidelines as below can help.

Babies playing with objects

Babies typically suck, bang and shake objects to see what they can do. Is this being creative? We would say that it is because every baby does this differently and develops different choices and

actions when they are playing with objects. The treasure basket - a selection of carefully chosen household and natural objects made of different materials all with different shapes and textures - will keep a young baby happily engrossed in play. None of the objects in a treasure basket are plastic for this reason. Babies love to feel different textures with their tongues - a very sensitive organ that relays information back to the babies' brains about each object. This is the first exploration of objects that babies engage in; along with that comes 'shake, bang and roll', the main movements that young babies perform with objects. First, the object goes to the mouth for exploration with the tongue - 'how does it feel, what does it taste like, can it be chewed?' - then, in exploring what else the object can do, the baby will shake - does it make a sound, is it heavy or light? - perhaps then followed by banging the object - if it did not make a sound when shook, maybe it will when banged?

