

# Children Learn Through Play

By Natalie Hamilton and Jan McFarlane

As adults, we think about play in many different ways. We think about it in terms of the things we do when we are not at work, how we have fun and in terms of the particular games or sports we enjoy. In a society where we talk about "knowledge" and "learning" as the keys to future success there may be a tendency to view children's play in much the same way; as down time, something frivolous, and something to occupy children in between "educational" (and therefore more valuable) activities. This type of thinking can be seen in the pushed down curriculum emerging in many early childhood settings, where increasingly younger children are engaged in structured activities, worksheets and stencils, often originally developed for the primary school classroom.

When we devalue children's 'play' in this way, we may be overlooking the rich opportunities that play provides for children to make choices, develop new skills, solve problems, and make sense of the world they live in.

Over time there have been many theoretical perspectives about the value of play. The psychoanalytical theories of Freud and Erikson suggested that children's imaginary play has a key role in the formation of personality and children's early socialisation (Frost, Wortham and Reifel, 2001). Piaget said that children's play reflected their developing understanding of the world (Frost et al, 2001). Vygotsky defined play as a zone in which children's mental capabilities are extended, while, Bateson described play as the context in which complex social structures are constructed and rehearsed (Frost et al, 2001).

Our current thinking about the value of children's play continues to build on these perspectives. Fleet and Robertson (2004: p.5) suggest that it is time for early and middle childhood professionals to refocus and share our understanding of the learning that happens through play:

- new thinking and understanding through the exploration of materials and ideas;
- problem solving through trial and error, negotiation and seeing others points of view;
- resilience by taking the initiative, taking risks, making mistakes;

## This article relates to:

**FDCQA:** Quality Areas 2 and 3

**OSHCQA:** Quality Areas 4 and 5

**QIAS:** Quality Areas 3 and 4

- social competence through collaboration and learning ways to work effectively with and alongside others;
- mastery of new skills through practice; and
- resourcefulness, making something out of nothing.

Evans (2000: p.4) agrees, and reminds us that in both early childhood and outside school hours care settings, we need to find a balance between routine and structure and opportunities for children to initiate and maintain their own play. When adults control and organise activities, rather than providing opportunities for free and creative play, children are deprived of the opportunities to explore, take on new challenges and take responsibility for their own actions.

When children are able to choose what interests them and relate it to what they already know, they are more likely to become more confident and competent, better able to deal with the day-to-day challenges that confront them. When children initiate the play it is often more inclusive, since there is no requirement for children to play in the same way or to demonstrate the same outcome.

## The adult's role in children's play

As adults working in children's services, we must first of all reflect on our own understanding and beliefs about the value of children's play. If we believe that children develop skills and new thinking through their interaction with objects, ideas and people we are in a position to **advocate** the value of play in our conversations with families, co-workers and the wider community.

Those working with children also need to be skilled **observers** and **listeners**. By watching, listening and talking with children and their families the adults in the program can gain a deeper understanding of the child and their current thinking. This will assist in planning environments and experiences that build on their earlier successes and interests and help us determine how we can best support children in their play.

Children need unhurried **time to play**; time to themselves, time to imagine, dream and create. When we are planning for children's play we need to ensure that we allow large chunks of unstructured time in the program to accommodate these processes.

Providing an **environment** and **resources** that interest children and invite their curiosity will provoke their questions, awaken their imagination, and inspire them to explore. We need to find a balance between safe and challenging environments for children. If there is too little challenge, children will find new ways to take risks, often in unsafe and destructive ways. Too much challenge and too little supervision can result in children feeling frustrated, unsafe and afraid.

Children will use all sorts of materials to represent things and to express and communicate their ideas. By providing access to a wide variety of open ended materials and equipment allows children to choose the ones that interest them and match their level of competence.

Research has shown that children's play becomes richer and more complex when adults support children in their play (Vygotsky). It is therefore important that we make time to **share in children's play** and to build on the opportunities to extend the play as they unfold. Again balance is the key when determining the adult's role in children's play; neither directive nor too unaware, mediating to help children solve a problem while allowing them to negotiate their own solution, assisting children to express their ideas and feelings while helping them to respect those of others.

Remember play is a child's way of learning and understanding the world around them. It is an important medium for all aspects of children's growth and development. It is essential for a child's physical, social, emotional and intellectual development.



It provides children with the opportunity to:

- practice skills;
- develop positive social skills and behaviour;
- learn about themselves and others;
- build self esteem;
- learn and practice language;
- develop and refine creativity;
- pursue and develop own interests;
- express feelings;
- explore materials, equipment and natural objects;
- develop and refine problem solving skills; and
- develop independence and autonomy.

Children should be given the opportunity to engage in spontaneous play that is child initiated and free from adult direction. Although adults have an important role to play in facilitating, supporting and extending play, it is essential for children to be involved in fun, informal play experiences that they have chosen. The child's right to play should be consistently reflected in the program, environment and the way staff interact with children. ■

## Further reading and references

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