

# PLAY BASED LEARNING

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As adults we all have memories of childhood play, times when we could pursue our own interests, create adventures and explore new ideas. Our play was both planned and spontaneous, and utilised a vast range of natural, found, man-made and bought materials. Through these experiences we gained new skills, tested our abilities, formed friendships and became increasingly adept at navigating our way through the world.

Children today are immersed in technology and have increasing expectations placed on them regarding academic achievement. This places greater pressure on care and education environments to provide programs that focus on and maintain academic pursuits. However the importance of play as a vehicle for learning cannot be underestimated. Early childhood education has a long history of valuing play and this understanding is becoming more prevalent in primary education. It is also emphasised in the new national and Victorian frameworks for early years education and is being revitalised across many children's services.

Promoting play-based learning requires adults to rethink their notions of play and develop programs that integrate play and learning into the curriculum.

'Research shows that children are playing-learning individuals. In an open and tolerant atmosphere, where children are free to make their own choices, both play and learning dimensions will be present. Children do not separate play and learning unless they are influenced by adults.' (p.3 Pramling Samuelsson, 2008)

## What is play based learning?

- Play based learning draws from children's natural desire to engage in experiences based on their interests, strengths and developing skills. When children initiate play, they are more motivated to learn and develop positive dispositions towards learning. The educator's role in supporting play-based learning

is vital. Belonging Being and Becoming, The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (2009:15) outlines the many roles educators take in play and the range of strategies they use to support learning. These include:

- Engaging in sustained shared conversations within play experience to extend children's thinking
- Providing a balance between child led, child initiated and educator supported learning
- Creating learning environments to support learning
- Interacting with babies and children within play to build attachment
- Supporting the inclusion of all children in play
- Recognising spontaneous teachable moments as they occur and using intentional teaching strategies such as demonstrating, and engaging in shared thinking and problem solving

## A play-based program;

- Incorporates children's ideas and interests into planned experiences and routines
- Utilises children's ideas and interests to extend and create new experiences
- Utilises indoor and outdoor areas to facilitate play and learning
- Offers a variety of play spaces, e.g. art, dramatic play, sensory, construction
- Offers a range of open-ended experiences and materials
- Enables children to self-select materials and play independently
- Enables children to transform play spaces



- Allows children to play for extended periods of time without interruption
- Allows children to extend their play and projects for extended periods
- Allows children to work alone or with others
- Caters for different abilities and learning styles
- Connects experiences to children's lives
- Links children's investigations to key learning areas or outcomes
- Offers flexible routines that have minimal disruption to children's play

### Benefits of play based learning

'Play provides the most natural and meaningful process by which children can construct knowledge and understandings, practice skills, immerse themselves naturally in a broad range of literacy and numeracy and engage in productive, intrinsically motivating learning environments. (p.21, Walker, 2007).

A play-based program has many benefits for children as it facilitates the development of skills, dispositions and knowledge. An effective play-based program can assist children to develop lifelong learning skills that will stay with them beyond the early learning environment. Engaging in play-based learning enables children to use and develop thinking skills such as problem solving, reasoning and lateral thinking. It offers opportunities to interact with others, develop communication strategies and work in collaboration with peers and adults. It can foster literacy, numeracy and the development of scientific concepts. As children are empowered to make decisions

and initiate play, they become confident and motivated learners.

This in turn fosters responsibility and self-regulation. Play also provides children with many opportunities to resolve conflict, challenge unfair play and embrace diversity.

### What does play based learning look like in practice?

The aim of the play-based program is 'to promote a sense of wonder, exploration, investigation and interest in a rich range of materials, resources and opportunities in which the child can engage. (p. 30, Walker, 2007) The child is viewed as being instrumental to the way in which materials and equipment are selected and organised within the environment. Such environments are often described as child focused as children are constantly engaged in meaningful learning experiences. While children's interests form the basis of the program, the environment needs to be carefully planned and presented in ways that are inviting to young children. All experiences are based on supporting a balance of child and adult initiated ideas and investigations and utilise the indoor and outdoor areas equally. Specific play spaces or areas may be arranged to within the environment to engage children in different areas of learning such as art, literacy and construction. Within each area children should be offered a range of open-ended and loose materials that can be used across different abilities and diverse interests. This is particularly important for mixed age grouping however within a single age group, it also enables children to explore their interests using their individual strengths and skills.

A play based program does not limit or reduce the role of the adult in children's play. Although children are less likely to want adult intervention in their play as they become older, an interested adult can still play a critical role in enhancing children's play and learning.

As these aspects can differ greatly between children, an effective play-based program actively supports and includes all children.

A key element of the play-based program is the opportunity for children to pursue their interests for extended periods of time. Many programs for children rely heavily on themes, pre-planned activities and constant change.

Regardless of how often children attend the program, it is vital for play spaces and experiences to be offered over extended periods. This enables children to fully explore materials and master new skills through repeated practice. When guided by children, the educator will soon become aware when experiences and materials need to be changed, extended or removed from the program.

It is also important to consider aspects such as storage and how children's play and learning will be displayed and shared with families. As children becoming increasingly competent, it is essential to offer more opportunities for self-selection and independent play. Children should be free to move equipment and select materials from open shelving and storage areas. These opportunities empower children to construct their own learning and scaffold the learning of others. An effective program also supports self-regulation and encourages children to become more responsible for their own play and learning.

### **The role of the adult in play-based learning**

A play-based program does not limit or reduce the role of the adult in children's play. Although children are less

likely to want adult intervention in their play as they become older, an interested adult can still play a critical role in enhancing children's play and learning. Effective play-based learning requires adults to have a strong image of the child and view them as capable, competent and co-constructors of the learning environment.

The adult develops positive relationships with children and families and uses their observations of children, information from families and colleagues, and meaningful interactions with children to determine the curriculum. As this knowledge changes, the program is also adapted to mirror children's changing interests and skills.

### **The role of the adult in the play based program is to;**

- Interact with and observe children to gain insights into their interests, skills and knowledge
- Be responsive to children's cues and the way they use the environment and materials
- Seek information from families and colleagues to better understand children and plan for their learning
- Create inviting play areas with open-ended materials
- Create an unhurried environment where children have time to explore and extend their investigations
- Seek out resources and information that will extend children's interests and learning
- Provide modelling and instruction when required
- Offer suggestions and encourage children to learn from each other
- Modify play areas as children's interest change
- Be an active learner



## Documenting and assessing play-based learning

Regulations and quality assurance require all children's services to plan and document the program. While this is a valid reason for documentation, it should not be the sole purpose for the methods chosen to record information. More importantly, documentation should make children's play and learning visible to the child, family and wider community. It should capture children's interests, skills and knowledge and highlight changes as children grow and develop. Children should be active contributors to individual and group documentation, and families should also be encouraged to share and exchange information with educators. Documentation should enhance children's learning and provide positive accounts of children's participation in the program.

The documentation used to assess children's learning can take many forms, however the methods selected needs to meet accountability requirements, reflect the service philosophy, be meaningful for the intended audience and manageable for educators. When all of these aspects are considered, documentation is more likely to offer a real insight into children's play and learning.

Both the national and Victorian early years frameworks discuss the importance of assessment for learning and highlight key elements of effective assessment.

High quality documentation captures children's learning on a regular basis and uses a systematic approach to ensure the learning of all children is made visible. Educators need

to consider factors such as time, the availability of resources and the experience of staff when determining methods of documentation. Families should also be engaged in ways that reflect the diversity of each community.

## Conclusion

Play is vital to children's wellbeing and sense of belonging and forms the basis of who they become in the future. When play and learning are woven together, children are more likely to develop positive dispositions towards learning and real understandings of the world around them. This enhances their sense of self and gives them a strong foundation from which they can become competent and capable individuals in a changing world.

## References

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Pramling Samuelsson, 'The playing-learning child in preschool', *Every Child*, Vol 14 No 2, p. 3. Walker, *Play Matters*, ACER, Melbourne.