

Leading play-based pedagogies

Advocating for every child's

right to learn through play

In this article, **Lennie Barblett**, **Sandra Cheeseman** and **Catharine Hydon** emphasise children's right to learn through play no matter the age. Additionally, they suggest that all educators lead and be articulate in their advocacy of play-based pedagogies for children's learning, development and wellbeing.

At the 2021 Early Childhood Australia National Conference, we spoke about leading play-based pedagogies. This is a live issue, but while it is often discussed by educators, it is not easily reflected upon. This is above all because despite 'play' being a commonly used word in early childhood, it is not easily defined. It is acknowledged to have a number of characteristics (often contested), such as bringing pleasure to the player and being self-motivating, self-initiated, active and process-oriented rather than product-driven.

However, trying to describe what play is to others can often be difficult and abstract. Nevertheless, we know that learning through play 'provides opportunities for children to actively and imaginatively engage with people, objects and the environment' (Queensland Government, 2019). In other words, it is an important part of our pedagogy and assists children's learning, development and wellbeing and is therefore worthy of serious reflection.

In our presentation, we described some understandings about learning through play in different contexts. We grappled with thinking about advocating for it to be a foundational part of each educator's pedagogy and practice.



Infant/Toddler

In honouring the infant or toddler's right to learn through play, we acknowledge the capabilities of the youngest children and recognise their play can and should be complex and challenging. All too often, educators underestimate the capabilities of infants and toddlers to theorise and establish their own learning agendas. If we pause and wait while observing a young child at play, we often see evidence of complex thought, trial-and-error problem solving and adaptation of resources to make play more challenging.

When we become more in tune with infants' and toddlers' play, we move away from simply setting up 'activities'. Often activities are pitched well below their capabilities and they quickly become bored and move on to the next absorbing thing. Once we see the potential of infants and toddlers to investigate, test out their own theories and adapt to their learning environment, we begin to think about how resources can be used for play and learning rather than simply creating amusing activities.

For infants and toddlers, the world is new and things are undiscovered. Crawling under a table and peeking out from beneath the overhanging tablecloth is not just fun but also an opportunity for an infant to engage in peek-a-boo with their peers, test out their courage and physically navigate their body through an unfamiliar space. When we are knowledgeable about how infants and toddlers learn, we begin to see the potential for rich learning in all manner of everyday resources. As advocates for infants and toddlers, educators should insist on meaningful learning experiences based on secure relationships, where adults really tune in to each child's capabilities and learning agendas.



Pre-schoolers

For deepening our understanding of the place of play for three- and four-year-old children, *reframing* is necessary. This requires a shift from nebulous statements, such as that which suggests 'play is the work of childhood', to a more robust understanding of the sophisticated nature of play in young children's learning and development and how educators intentionally support and enhance these encounters.

The *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)* encourages educators to understand learning through play and urges both children and adults to show intentionality in learning. Furthermore, it outlines how play as well as other teaching and learning strategies are used in play contexts.

Early childhood educators take on many roles in play with children and use a range of strategies to support learning ... They provide a balance between child led, child initiated and educator supported learning (DEEWR, 2009, p. 17).

In this context, play becomes a dynamic interplay between educators and children where the pleasurable and emergent nature of children's play episodes is scaffolded by thoughtful, purposeful and deliberate interventions that stretch children's thinking.

Pedagogical documentation plays an important part in helping us understand this interplay. By recording and sharing, in writing and images, the rich learning that occurs in children's play, we are making this often misunderstood aspect of children's learning visible not only for colleagues and families but also for the children themselves.

School Age

The Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA) (2021) worked with a number of primary schools to encourage teachers to think more deeply about block play, using the principles and practices of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). Educators working with children aged from three to eight years old considered how block play could be a major consideration of their curriculum. In their deep reflections and discussions, the educators thought through three big ideas to incorporate:

- *Child-initiated play* develops critical skills. Educators make intentional decisions not to intervene but rather trust children to develop their own ideas through play.
- *Playful learning* is encouraged by educators using thoughtful questioning to enhance learning and problem solving. Teachers set up provocations by providing different resources to go with the blocks or design a challenge or brief that supports problem-based learning.
- *Teacher-directed learning*, where educators extend children's concept and content knowledge. Whether as a whole class or in small groups, explorations of key skills or knowledge are incorporated by children and extend their play in ways they may not have thought of before. It was found that children practiced, transferred and used newly acquired knowledge and skills in play to consolidate their learning when educators got involved.



Advocacy for play

Educators who advocate for learning through play are equipped with the knowledge, theory, evidence and language to describe exactly what children are learning and how these outcomes equip them to navigate the complexities of contemporary life. Discussions about play-based learning are not for the faint-hearted. Advocates for play-based learning need to be able to explain how children's mathematical skills, for example, are enhanced by them digging holes in the sand. Included in a framing of play is the need for critical analysis regarding our own role as enablers and champions for children's right to play. Many educators in Australia believe that play is something that children do and intentional teaching is something that educators do. Such conceptualisations of play underestimate both educators' important contributions to play and children's capacities to be intentional in their own learning. It is time for educators to step up and embrace contemporary understandings that ensure child-led, educator-guided play episodes are a feature of every early childhood program.

As ECA commences the Year of Play, we invite you to become an informed advocate for children's right to play.

References

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