

Play in the home

Why it's essential for

early childhood development



The home offers rich and authentic opportunities for play-based learning, **Jo Grimmond** observes. Children's formative experiences of play in the home lay the foundation for their later learning, and digital platforms, such as the new *Play and Learn Together* web-based resource, can be used to enhance these experiences.

Bringing play to life in the home

Children from birth engage in discovery as they investigate and explore the world around them. Play is the driving force for learning—as children engage in play, they learn to make sense of their world. Through play, children learn to communicate, innovate, create, imagine and problem-solve. So much of this learning happens in the home environment. Parents and caregivers are a child's first teachers, and the daily interactions and experiences they share with their children when they play together will have a significant influence on children's lifelong development, igniting a passion for learning and exploration.

Providing children with opportunities to 'explore, experiment, question and

discover new concepts about the world in playful ways is central to their learning, development and wellbeing' (NSW Government, 2022). In other words, the home learning environment, with families at its core, has a critical role in a child's development and offers rich and authentic play-based learning opportunities through routines, daily rhythms and family rituals. By making use of common items in the home, connecting with natural materials outdoors and tuning in to the many moments of playful learning throughout the day to foster children's curiosity, creativity, investigation and inquiry, families can enhance learning.

Supporting families to engage in play with their children

As families are the first and most important educators in a child's life,

engaging in play to support learning is critically important—not only for the child's development, but also for building the quality of familial relationships. The learning continuum from birth is enhanced by rich, secure relationships and experiences and, by the time children reach school, the most important learning foundations are in place. Strong relational, play-based pedagogy within the home and early learning environments fosters learning, and children flourish when early childhood educators and families work together (DEEWR, 2009). So, how can the early childhood practitioner advocate and promote play in the home and encourage families to engage in play to promote learning? While families are naturally playful in the home, they are often searching for guidance, support and ideas on how

to enrich their child's learning. The COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst for us to consider innovative ways to engage with the home learning environment, and technology proved to be an effective connecting tool to ensure that the rich relational pedagogy between the home and early learning settings continued. It was also a unique opportunity for early childhood practitioners to focus their pedagogy on thoughtfully planning for the home environment and sharing ideas with families about how to engage in play with their children. There was certainly a need for quality resources to support this pedagogical approach. When we share knowledge about how children learn with families, parents and carers begin to see the potential for learning in everyday materials and routines that can unlock rich learning opportunities for children.

The use of digital platforms to promote play

In this technology-driven world, digital platforms can offer an opportunity to share reliable parenting information with families. The potential of online platforms as tools to advocate for play should be considered a powerful means of strengthening children's learning and supporting families to 'scaffold their children's play and weave a playful approach into a family's daily routines' (Cameron et al., 2021, p. 43) through rich experiences.

Bringing play and learning to life in the home:

Play & Learn Together

While there are many online platforms that provide parenting support for families, *Play & Learn Together*, launched in March 2022, was developed to encourage parents and carers of young children (birth to five years)

to incorporate playful learning with their children in the home and in environments regularly encountered in daily life. The *Play & Learn Together* resource (developed by Early Start, University of Wollongong, in partnership with Playgroup Australia and Early Childhood Australia) features evidence-informed, play-based experiences that align with family routines and daily rhythms, utilising everyday materials and interactions to bring play to life. It also provides an opportunity to share knowledge of current research, links to the *Early Years Learning Framework* and World Health Organization guidelines and strategies to scaffold and extend learning beyond the play experience.

Play & Learn Together connects research with learning experiences and builds capacity in families to make quality choices around play experiences with confidence that they have been developed by experts

in the field. In addition, it provides educators with a multitude of play ideas to share with families to advocate for play-based learning opportunities, including step-by-step ways to scaffold and enhance learning with language and open-ended questioning techniques, which are integral to intentional pedagogy (DEEWR, 2009).

References

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- NSW Government. (2022, February 1). *Educational resources to use at home*. NSW Department of Education. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/early-childhood-education/information-for-parents-and-carers/learning-from-home>

***Play & Learn Together* (www.playandlearntogether.com.au) is a new, free and evidence-informed website, available across Australia, and is designed to support children, families, caregivers and early childhood educators. It was made possible with generous support from the Ian Potter Foundation.**

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