

You may believe in the value of teaching through play but do you find it easy to say why or put it into practice? It is important to be able to explain the theory behind what you do, especially if you are challenged by parents.

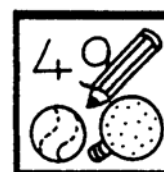
# The value of play



Practitioner



Manager



Cross-curricular

**There is considerable confusion about the role of play in young children's learning. Recent research for the DfES, led by Janet Moyles, highlighted that few early years practitioners could explain the theory of play. This, inevitably, leads to a lack of confidence in play as a vehicle for learning. If we cannot explain why something is important we are in a weak position to protect it. It is time to strengthen our beliefs, so that we are all confident to stand up for children's right to learn through playful experience.**

## What is play?

A simple definition of play is hard to come by. Tina Bruce sees play as being part of a network of development and learning, which also includes first-hand experience, games with rules and representations. She suggests that play co-ordinates learning. The Curriculum Guidance Jar the Foundation Stage says: 'Children do not make a distinction between 'play' and 'work' and neither should practitioners'.

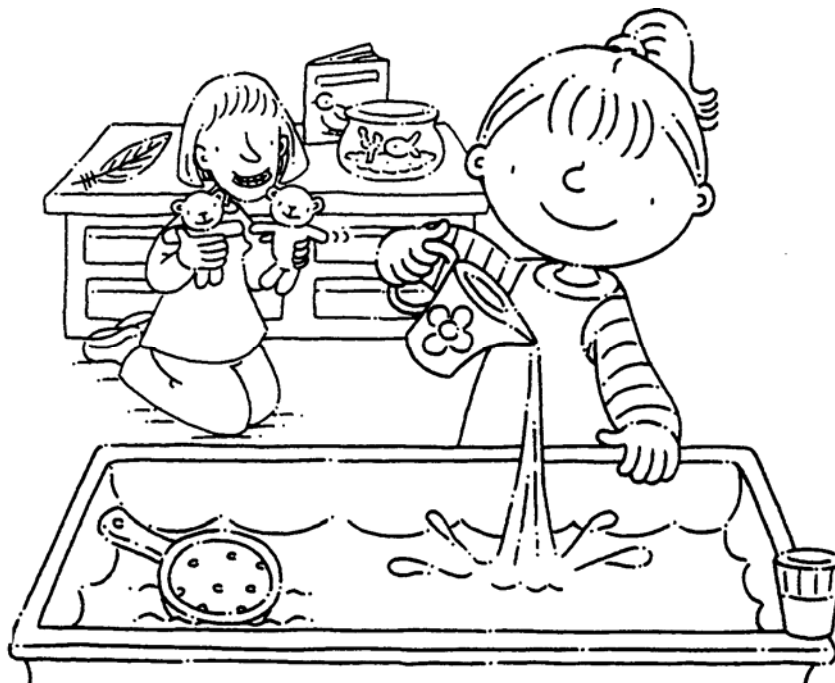
Jennie Lindon defines play as 'a range of activities undertaken for their own interest enjoyment or the satisfaction that results'. This is a useful working definition. Children must feel motivated and that they have ownership and control over their play. If an adult starts to take over the activity it stops feeling like play to the children - and often the adult finds herself playing alone! Play must also be open-ended.

*'Children's Play always has a purpose, or point of interest, for them. ... However, the purpose may not be immediately, or ever, apparent to adults.'*

There should be no required outcome for everyone to achieve. Instead, each child should be able to explore in his or her own way and come to their own conclusions or achieve their own goals.

In play, children draw on and develop their past experiences and are prompted by their interaction with materials' and other people, to explore new knowledge, language and skills. Children's play always has a purpose, or point of interest, for them. The child who seems to be aimlessly pouring water may be practising newly gained pouring skills, may be reliving the experience of seeing a waterfall or may be feeling anxious or sad and gaining

concerned that their children have so few play opportunities). The learning, which takes place during, or as a result of, play, can often not be seen. Parents may put pressure on practitioners to get their children to produce work on paper because they think that this is real learning. A knowledgeable practitioner is able to expose the limitations of most paper based exercises and show, by sharing observations and explaining what they mean, the much deeper thinking and learning the children are involved with during play. For example, children show much more sophisticated levels of understanding of number and quantity in role play when calculating what is needed for



comfort from this calming activity. However, the purpose may not be immediately, or ever, apparent to adults.

It is this lack of certainty about play and the fact that they cannot control it, which worries many practitioners and parents (although there is a growing number of parents who are

a picnic than they do when sitting over a worksheet. In play, children see the point of what they are doing and thinking about, and stretch themselves to the limit of their abilities. This is often not the case when they are asked to complete an adult-directed task.

## How does play contribute to development and learning?

- Adult memories of their own childhood play include:
- a lot of imaginative play - with dolls and soft toys or with other children (older and younger). Within imaginative play anything which came to hand was used as a play prop - sticks, net, curtains, leaves, buttons;
- construction play, such as making things out of boxes, blankets and a clothes horse;
- messy play - mud pies, water, leaves, making perfume with flower petals and water, making pastry;
- outdoor play – dens, street games (with a wide age range), being acrobats;
- games - skipping and chanting rhymes, ball games, whip and top, hide and seek, rounders, French cricket, tig;
- a lot of play with older and younger siblings and neighbours' children.
- Most adults remember having a great deal of time and freedom to play both in and out of doors.

When asked how childhood play helped their development as a learner and a person, adults say they gained social skills (learning to co-operate with others and to make and review their own rules); independence and a sense of responsibility; a feeling of being trusted by adults and by other children; enjoyment and fun; a sense of control, self-confidence and self-esteem; resourcefulness; physical health; an ability to occupy time productively without adult intervention (never feeling bored); a range of new knowledge and skills; an ability to assess risk; group working skills; an ability to develop friendships and how to deal with conflict; independence of spirit/mind-learning to take initiative; learning from mistakes; thinking creatively and using imagination. In other words, play made a powerful contribution to their well-being, all round development and learning. Many adults can find links between their current favourite leisure activities and the play experiences they enjoyed as children.

Children today are growing up in a different society where they have:

- much less freedom to play out of doors;
- less opportunity to socialise and play with other children away from an adult;
- less opportunity for play in mixed age groups;
- more visual input from television, computers, video and pictures in books and fewer opportunities to listen and create mental images;
- more manufactured toys which require little imagination.

When adults argue that 'we didn't play when we were at school and it didn't do us any harm', they are forgetting they had rich opportunities to learn through play at home and in their community.

If children growing up today do not experience a substantial amount of play in an early years setting, they will be missing out on many of the character building and life-enhancing experiences many of us took for granted.

## Why should play be given a central role in early learning?

All of us learn best when we want to do something and are least likely to learn when we are being made to do something of little interest. Children are naturally drawn to play experiences and concentrate for long periods in their self-chosen play.

Play offers children the chance to be in control, and feel competent, within relevant, meaningful and open-ended experiences, for example reading and writing for a real purpose and without pressure or fear of getting it wrong (such as spontaneously taking a message when on the telephone in role play or taking on a powerful role such as the mum or the doctor within role-play settings).

In their play children are able to meet their own needs and to make sense of their own, often confusing, world. Play involves exploring feelings, ideas, materials, relationships and roles, making connections between one experience and another and representing ideas, objects and environments. Opportunities within play to use one thing to represent another (for example a block as a mobile phone) lay important foundations for the later use of abstract symbols, such as letters and numbers, to represent ideas.

As they get older, children begin to develop longer more complex story lines in their play. The ability to develop a story line in play is a vital

## What about Reception classes?

*Children in Reception classes (and in Key Stage 1) must continue to learn through play. For these children, play brings the curriculum alive and helps them maintain motivation and interest. In most other European countries children experience a play-based curriculum until they are six or seven. Research shows that these children generally achieve more academically than ours, because their early years experience was meaningful and gave them a solid foundation for later more formal learning. The Foundation Stage was informed by this research and requires Reception teachers to build on the play-based curriculum which has been well established in the best nursery and pre-school settings.*

foundation for writing. Many older children, who are having difficulty with writing, do so because they have missed out on the language opportunities offered by role play, and cannot express their ideas. This is why role play is being reintroduced in a growing number of Key Stage 1 classes.

Play encourages creativity and imagination. It is intellectually, socially, emotionally, physically and linguistically challenging and encourages children to work in depth (alone and with others). It can offer all children the chance to explore and learn at their own pace and stage of development. It has a crucial role in enabling children to consolidate learning, particularly at a time when the pace is too fast for some children.

Play is important because it enables adults to observe children at their highest level of competence and to see the children's ideas, concerns and interests. Lev Vygotsky (an educational psychologist working in Russia during the 1920s and 1930s) said that, in their play, children are a head taller than themselves. Many early years' practitioners, who take time to observe their children at play, will know exactly what he meant.

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