

Professionals working in family day care, long day care and outside school hours care may tell families that they use a 'play based' approach for children's learning and development. Families may be unsure what this approach is and why it is considered to be an appropriate way to provide learning experiences for children. Learning through play is accepted by child care professionals and education experts as one of the most important ways that children learn and develop. Play is also recognised as a right for children in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). With increasing pressure on children to be high academic achievers and the busy nature of many childhoods, the Convention confirms that play is important for children's wellbeing and learning.

What is play?

Play is an activity where children show their remarkable ability for exploration, imagination and decision making. While play is often described as 'children's work' it is intensely enjoyable for them. The type of play children engage in and its purposes change over the course of childhood from infancy to adolescence.

Parents do not generally have to make children play or provide incentives to play. This is because children seem to have a natural urge to play and playing brings a level of pleasure and interest which means it can be maintained without external rewards.

How does play support children's development and learning?

Evidence shows that play can support learning across physical, social, emotional, and intellectual areas of development as well learning in different content areas including literacy and numeracy.

Physical development: Active play using large and small muscles such as climbing, running, ball games, digging, jumping, and dancing supports children's:

- overall health and sense of wellbeing
- physical growth
- appreciation for the benefits of active lifestyles
- skills for independence in self-help such as dressing or feeding.

Social and emotional development: Dramatic and imaginative play including dressing up or role play such as 'being' a mummy or daddy, or a bus driver, help to develop positive social and emotional skills and values by providing opportunities for children to:

- practise how to work with others
- learn negotiation skills - 'okay, you can be the doctor this time'
- make choices and decisions (which are life skills)

- develop confidence through experiencing feelings of success in play
- learn to control emotions and reduce impulsive behaviour (role play has rules and self-talk used in play helps children to regulate their actions)
- reduce stress as they act out feelings and events that might be worrying them
- develop qualities such as empathy and fairness as they learn to get along with other children.

Intellectual development: Playing alone or with others and with toys such as construction sets, dolls, digital games, and pretend play, supports children's intellectual development because their brains are very active in this type of play. From this play children learn:

- problem solving skills
- the power of imagination and creativity
- concepts (for example, shapes, colours, measurement)
- dispositions such as concentration and persistence which are important for life long learning.

Literacy and numeracy development: Play supports literacy and numeracy development because it requires thinking, language, interactions, and exploration. Specific literacy or numeracy skills and understandings include:

- increased understanding of words and their use
- listening and speaking skills
- writing skills through scribbling, painting, drawing
- how stories work (plot, characters, structure, purpose)
- learning that objects can stand for something else (a block can be a symbol for a telephone) which is foundation learning for formal reading, spelling and numeracy because letters, words or numerals are part of symbol systems
- learning that letters, words, symbols, numerals and signs have a purpose and are meaningful to others.

What does a play based approach to learning look like?

- There are informal, respectful interactions between child care professionals and children as adults ask and respond to questions which support children's learning through play.
- Child care professionals use a wide range of play based experiences for teaching children across different content areas rather than using structured 'lessons' or formal teaching experiences.
- Indoor and outdoor environments are arranged to encourage different types of play which are interesting, safe, appropriate and challenging for children. For example, child care professionals set up games indoors or outdoors that are appropriate for children's ages, or games which can be played safely and enjoyably by mixed age groups
- Resources that reflect children's age, interests and backgrounds are provided to stimulate and support play. Resources which allow open ended use such as blocks or cardboard boxes foster creativity and the ability to manipulate concepts mentally as children. For example, turn a box into a car or a garage.
- Child care professionals plan play experiences based on assessment of children's individual differences such as interests, developmental needs or skill levels. For example, a child's difficulty in holding small objects is overcome by ensuring that there are objects in the dramatic play area that she/he can hold. This supports her/his participation in imaginative play (being a mummy, a daddy, a doctor or a hairdresser).
- Child care professionals observe children's play in order to understand how they play and the values, skills and understandings they demonstrate in their play. For example, observation could reveal that a child learning English as a second language is using English

How can families contribute to children's learning through play?

- Sharing information about children's interests which helps child care professionals plan play experiences around those interests.
- Being playful with children at home because play is an excellent way to foster close bonds as well as for learning. Playing with your children is time well spent!
- Discussing play based learning with child care professionals in order to understand why it is important for children at every stage of their development.
- Advocating with child care professionals for safe and interesting play spaces in local communities.

words in his play, but not when asked questions during group story time. This knowledge would confirm that play experiences are valuable for this child.

- Child care professionals make intentional decisions to join children's play to extend children's learning or provide guidance if the play is not productive or inclusive of other children.
- There are large blocks of unhurried and uninterrupted time allowed for children's play rather than brief time slots. Research has shown that it takes time for children to get fully engaged in play experiences (Hirsh-Pasek et al, 2009).

Conclusion

Children's success as learners depends on strong foundations developed from infancy. Play based learning has the potential to foster critical skills, understandings and dispositions which are essential for children's formal academic achievement as well as for their wellbeing ■

References and further reading

- Hirsh-Pasek, K.; Golinkoff, R.; Berk, L.; & Singer, D. (2009). *A mandate for playful learning in preschool: Presenting the evidence*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- United Nations. (1989). *The convention on the rights of the child*. New York: UNICEF.
- Crook, S. (2004). *Just improvise! Innovative play experiences for children under eight*. Watson, ACT: Early Childhood Australia.

Useful websites

- Early Childhood Australia: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au
- ExchangeEveryDay: www.childcareexchange.com



For more information on Child Care Quality Assurance please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.

Telephone: 1300 136 554 or (02) 8260 1900
E-mail: qualitycare@ncac.gov.au
Level 3, 418a Elizabeth St
Surry Hills NSW 2010

www.ncac.gov.au