

A brief introduction to play-based learning

What Is Play-Based Learning? An Overview

Play-based learning is normally centered in early childhood and primary education, with the guiding principle that children can learn from and make sense of the world around them through play. There are different biological, historical, societal, educational, and developmental origins of play, and while play is difficult to define, it undeniably has a role in social and emotional development, and the physical development of the brain. Play is a joyful and satisfying experience, one considered so important for human development that the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights has declared play as a right of every child.

Play focuses on means, not ends: it is process-oriented, and there are many cognitive, behavioral, social, and emotional gains from experiencing play. Play has always been a significant part of human life at all ages and cultures throughout history, but play-based learning gathered momentum in the 20th century through the early work of Montessori and Dewey. Play can be unstructured or guided, allowing children to play freely or with learning objectives scaffolded by adults.

How effective is play-based learning?

While the evidence base for play-based learning is inconsistent because studies are difficult to replicate, research has pointed to benefits that are correlated with play. Existing evidence does not support causal claims about the unique importance of imaginary play for development, but research has pointed to correlations between play-based learning overall and improvements in reading and maths scores in primary school.

Quality play experiences yield well-developed memory skills, language development, and behavioral regulation, which later lead children to have more enhanced school adjustment and academic learning. Play can also shape social and emotional development: while playing with others (children and adults alike), children can build empathy, better negotiate conflicts, and develop their own sense of agency. Research has also linked play to students' self-regulated learning and attitudes toward learning. When children are successful in self-initiated play, they will build a foundation for later success in learning. In adolescence, play fosters creative thinking, problem solving, and a sense of independence and autonomy over students' own learning.

Play-based learning in schools provides all students with the opportunities to learn and experience positive outcomes from play. It is important to note that there are many cases in which students are unable to experience play. Students in poverty often lack safe spaces for play, opportunities for in-school and out-of-school creative outlets, and less time with parents for play, as low-income parents are often burdened by the social, financial, and emotional stresses of daily living. Moreover, in some cultures, parents put pressure on concrete academic learning outcomes, even if teachers recommend play-based learning. When parents do not support play-based learning, teachers may have difficulty implementing it into their practice.

When/ how should play-based learning be used in the classroom?

Most research and curriculum for play-based learning focuses on the early childhood years, but people of all ages can be involved in the planning, organisation, and experience of play environments. Some suggestions:

- In the early childhood classroom, create a daily schedule that includes active indoor and outdoor physical play. Integrate music, movement, and creative expression – and include adults in these play experiences.
- In the primary school classroom, introduce games to supplement learning. Playing card and board games can help students develop their social and emotional skills, and, in some cases, literacy and mathematics knowledge.
- In intermediate years, computer games can enhance students' educational experience by allowing them to develop digital skills while enjoying an activity that they might experience at home for leisure.
- In secondary school years, allow students the opportunity to present their understanding in playful way, such as creating songs students can write (or adapt based on pop songs) to review maths concepts and equations.

Regardless of age, it is important to create a positive environment when considering play-based learning as a part of your teaching approach. Some points to consider when creating an affective environment for play:

- How will you arrange the materials to invite and encourage exploration, inquiry, and learning?
- How will you support students in their explorations and risk taking?
- How much time will you allow for students to play freely, and how much time will you spend on structured conversation (among students, and between students and teachers)?

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