



How to integrate play and teaching in early childhood education



ECE resources

Researchers argue that play is a developmentally appropriate way for young children to learn, and it is associated with many positive personal, social and academic outcomes.

Play is engaging and motivating for young children, enhancing their ability to develop deeper knowledge, skills and lifelong learning dispositions. Play can stimulate learning, while learning can also stimulate play.

Some children may not have many opportunities to learn how to play without those provided at the early childhood setting. Providing play experiences may enable children to become expert players and benefit from the cognitive and social-emotional outcomes that are related to mature play but not immature play.

In addition, play pedagogies:

- provide a context for teachers to develop strong relationships with infants, toddlers and young children, as well as supporting relationships with families
- are often sufficiently flexible and responsive to meet the needs of all learners and enable teachers to learn about children, their learning needs, and funds of knowledge from home
- reflect the way children have learned in their homes and communities and offer a non-threatening environment for children to openly and spontaneously express themselves and make sense of their personal interests and fascinations
- give children opportunities to show competence and understanding, both verbally and non-verbally
- offer children opportunities to express their agency, and take an active and powerful role in defining and negotiating play and their own learning and development

What are some of the challenges in working out an approach to play?

Play can be conceived and enacted in a variety of ways, drawing on different cultural and theoretical perspectives, which can lead to a lack of clarity about play provision and pedagogy. Your approach to play will also be determined by your individual beliefs and the initiative, actions and needs of the children in your early childhood setting: it may look different for every group.

Many early childhood settings develop free play programmes aligning with the traditional emphasis of early childhood education in New Zealand, but there is also the potential to integrate guided play and teacher-directed play with free play to a greater or lesser extent to develop a continuum of play opportunities. In fact, research suggests that this is a more effective approach for children's learning.

Developing a continuum of free, guided and teacher-directed play

Play-based learning can incorporate a continuum of activities from child-led free play, to guided and teacher-directed play. Different kinds of play are all valuable and are used in different combinations in order to support children's learning. Play types include free play, guided play such as inquiry play

(to extend an interest or investigate a question) and collaborative play (setting up role play scenarios together) as well as prescribed but playful activities such as games.

When play is seen as a continuum of experiences incorporating both child-initiated and open-ended activity and adult-led and directed activity, and encompassing a range of engagements and interactions between children, teachers, and content, teachers:

- engage in spontaneous play with children in intentional ways, nudging children to meet the learning goals of the early childhood curriculum, through strategies such as making purposeful suggestions
- build on children's interests and play needs by planning adult-guided learning opportunities aimed at building the content knowledge and skills associated with children's activities and inviting children into new collaborative and playful experiences

How do teachers organise for a continuum of play types?

Children have opportunities for free choice from a wide variety of open-ended resources and materials, and can visit and revisit their interests on a day to day basis. Explorations and inquiries are initiated by the children or teacher, and both structured and flexible to be extended in spontaneous and planned directions. For example, teachers might integrate academic goals into paper plane making by introducing a scientific method for testing out different adherents such as tape, glue or staples to discover the impact on flight. Teachers use ideas and questions that emerge within open-ended play for longer term projects and inquiries in which a group of children become interested, such as improving and testing the playdough recipe, or investigating the ants that keep coming into the classroom.

In this way, teachers see children as competent learners and knowledge creators capable of developing planned and purposeful outcomes-focused play themselves, and with theories that can be investigated in collective projects and inquiries. Teachers collaboratively negotiate and plan projects with children at the same time as developing and deepening relationships, drawing upon children's desire to be with other children and adults that they like and are interested in to motivate participation. Play is integrated with inquiry-based learning and used to encourage scientific thinking and conceptual understanding.

What does the research say?

Many researchers note that different types of play and instruction all offer opportunities for personal, social and academic learning. For example, while child-directed play is likely to be less efficient than teacher-directed learning, it remains important for overall healthy development, reduced anxiety and better social skills. Scientific evidence suggests that a combination of free play and guided play, and attention to both children's academic and social development, is the most effective approach and is linked to better achievement outcomes.

Sociocultural models of learning view children as active and competent learners who co-construct their learning with peers and teachers in ways that are personally meaningful. Play can provide relational spaces in which children and adults can connect with each other and to the opportunities of the play environment, and develop the intersubjectivity required for co-constructing activities and knowledge. Research finds co-construction and intersubjectivity (shared purposes, understandings or intents) to be very important for early childhood pedagogies.

According to research, effective play pedagogies are focused on two essential activities. The first is observing play, which allows teachers to:

- develop insights into the ways in which children interpret experience, express ideas and construct meaning in their self-initiated play
- seek out interesting, practical projects to carry out with children
- be open to complex possibilities, and avoid simplifying children's play into easily identifiable components that match curricular objectives or areas
- be sensitive to whatever children are attempting to make meaning of in that moment of play

The second area involves extending play, which allows teachers to:

- create play scenarios and interactions that enact diverse perspectives on the same scenario, encouraging multiple perspectives and critical reflection
- enrich and expand the tools, spaces and materials for children to express their ideas, enabling a genuine co-construction of play which is not dominated by adults and adults' choices for children's play
- balance support for children's play with well-planned and intentional provocations that relate to and extend the play interests of children
- work together with children on topics of mutual interest and have high expectations of children
- encourage collaboration

How to reflect further on your play pedagogy

Take a long-term perspective and allow time for coming to understand the principles underpinning play pedagogies.

Challenge your thinking about play:

- Be clear what you mean by play in your context. Reframing play as playful exploration, for example, might make the teachers' involvement in scaffolding and extending play more salient.
- Consider potential or perceived challenges and recognise these as blocks to thinking and working in play-based ways. Discuss them openly and honestly.

Develop networks for supporting learning about play pedagogies:

- Create a network for learning about and reflecting upon play pedagogies, making use of both face-to-face meetings and online communications to engage in professional learning and professional dialogue.
- Engage in collaborative inquiry, and use guided observation and video to review and analyse practice.

Enhance play by getting involved and intentional:

- Design more sophisticated opportunities for play by unpacking priority curricular outcomes for your setting, and then intentionally designing opportunities for play with these in mind. Build off children's responses to play opportunities.
- Use children's expertise in play, as children are usually very capable of inventing play and using play environments creatively. Don't fear getting involved in play, give it a go!

Further Reading

Broadhead, P. & Burt, A. (2012). Understanding young children's learning through play: Building playful pedagogies. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Cutter-MacKenzie, A., Edwards, S., Moore, D., Boyd, W. (2014). Young children's play and environmental education in early childhood education. Cham:Springer.

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Dr Vicki Hargraves

Vicki is a teacher, mother, writer, and researcher. She recently completed her PhD using philosophy to explore creative approaches to understanding early childhood education. She is inspired by the wealth of educational research that is available and is passionate about making this available and useful for teachers.