



Supporting learning through play

Play is essential for healthy development and learning. As an educator, you can support children's learning and wellbeing through play.

When should adults join in?

If a child is busy playing, you might simply look on and get to know how they play, what they're good at and what they like doing.

Sometimes children will signal that they'd like you to be involved. Young babies who are just learning how to play might look at you as if they want to do something with you and be delighted when you engage with them. They communicate through their expressions and body movements when they're tired and have had enough. Toddlers and older children will often let you know they want to play with you as well as when they want to play on their own again.

When a child is not already playing but is perhaps looking for something to do, it's appropriate for you to invite them to play or be more directive. This may be to learn a new game, to listen to a story, to sing a song or just to have fun.

Sometimes when children's play isn't working well, they may need some help, such as when they get frustrated with something they're doing and want to

give up, or when they don't have the skills to negotiate social situations.

How can educators support children's play?

You can help support learning and development through play with the following tips.

Providing safe spaces

- Arrange safe places for children to play, indoors and outdoors.
- Provide safe boundaries and limits on their play to ensure that it's a positive experience for all.

Provide a time and a place

- Arrange time for play and make it a priority every day.
- Try to make it possible for children to finish play that they're very involved in before having to move on to do something else. If something else can't wait, give children warning of the change.

Provide playthings

- Provide children with some playthings (such as dolls, building blocks, playdough and paints).
- Allow children to find their own playthings both inside and outside. For example, fabrics, boxes, leaves, gumnuts, puddles, pots and pans.
- Seeing what a child enjoys doing will give you more ideas of the things they may like to play with. They may ask for particular toys or books that relate to their current interests. Finding children something they really love can help them to know their likes and dislikes are valued and respected, which helps to build their sense of self.
- The best playthings encourage creative play and can be used for many things. These include bats and balls, drawing materials, blocks, dress-ups, dolls, puppets, sandpits, water and mud, things to push, pull and ride on, containers, playdough, musical instruments, and books.

Follow the child's lead

- Children need opportunities to play and work out feelings in their own way.
- Resist the temptation to criticise, direct or turn play into a lesson.
- Show support by being near, noticing and accepting what the child is playing rather than directing or taking the lead away from the child (for example, saying "I see you're singing your baby to sleep in the cradle" is supportive, but saying "Now the baby is asleep – what do you think the mother will do next?" is directing and taking the lead away from the child).

Provide opportunities for children to play with others

Children benefit from playing on their own, with other children of varying ages and with adults. However, children can easily become overwhelmed and tired if there are too many children or not enough things to go around.

Offer guidance

Children need the support of adults to learn how to manage their feelings and social situations. This is essential social learning. You can help children to identify their feelings, know their feelings are understood, and help them learn to express and

manage their feelings in ways that aren't hurtful to themselves or others. This might be achieved by:

- being nearby to help a child feel safe, included and able to talk about how they feel
- providing encouragement to a child to get started or to feel comfortable enough to join in
- ensuring the play is inclusive
- watching and commenting occasionally on what's happening – which can help children to notice how their behaviour might be affecting others and to develop empathy.

Find out more about why play is important [here](#).

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about the benefits of children maintaining positive and respectful relationships with peers in the [Connect module](#).

References

Rushton, S., Juola-Rushton, A., & Larkin, E. (2010). Neuroscience, play and early childhood education: Connections, implications and assessment. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 37(5), 351-361.

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