



The Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program



Thinking about play

Setting the scene

The online Forum set up as part of the *Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program* (www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eylfpplp) has raised some very interesting questions about the themes of the first two.

E-Newsletters—play and intentional teaching. It seems timely to begin to unpack some of the tensions that exist between ‘traditional practice’ and ‘new perspectives.’ ‘Thinking about play’ are the focus in this, the third in the newsletter series; ‘Thinking about intentions’ will be the focus of e-Newsletter four.

In their forthcoming book in the *Research in Practice series: Learning and teaching through play* (ECA, 2010), Anne Kennedy and Lennie Barblett draw our attention to the fact that the two topics are related: Educators’ intentional planning is essential to support and extend children’s learning through play.



Understanding play

Kennedy and Barblett explain that in each phase of early childhood, children have different “learning agendas” which motivate them to ‘explore their environments, engage with others and discover new things and ideas’.

For example:

- play in infancy is focused on exploration using the senses and body
- as toddlers, children enjoy engaging in pretend play such as ‘feeding a dolly, driving a car or rocking teddy to sleep’
- in the preschool years, children’s play increasingly involves negotiating roles with other children in imaginative and complex play—‘you can be the baby and I’ll be the mum’
- as they move through school, children actively participate in play experiences guided by more formal codes and rules and often requiring collaboration.

The authors suggest that: ‘Adopting a play-based approach does not mean that children are left on their own with adults acting only as “supervisors.” Instead, it means that informed educators observe children in play, interact sensitively with them and use their professional knowledge to promote and extend every child’s wellbeing and learning.

‘... in each phase of early childhood, children have different “learning agendas” ...’

Issues in play

Shared understandings

Participants in the online Forum are suggesting that early childhood educators may not always have a shared understanding about 'play', its varied nature and how and when it might be used as a context for learning.

Neville, for example, commented that when he asked parents 'what they thought their children got from being in our place', their responses bowled him over:

The opportunity to play like we did as kids; freedom just to be kids, unhurried, take risks.

Neville's place really values play as freedom and managed risk. And he is delighted that parents have picked up on, and agree with this approach.

I wonder if they also realise how much children are learning through particular kinds of play and how educators 'take risks' and plan to maximise children's learning?

For example, Neville described a situation when it began raining after a long dry spell:

Staff and children ran around outside, enjoying feeling the water on their bodies. So, children were in one sense, 'just having fun', but they were also 'exploring the natural world' and 'sharing in a rich social, sensory experience'.

Judy, in the Forum, commented that teachers in training aren't always able to see the difference between child-led play with educator engagement and intentional, adult-led play, and when each is appropriate for particular kinds of learning. And yet, as future educators, it's important that they understand, as Neville said: 'How adults create opportunities for children to engage in purposeful play'.

These discussions suggest that educators in an early childhood service need to return often to the topic of play, to unpack their varied understandings and to build a shared view of the power of play and the educators' role in 'licensing' and supporting it.

Environments for play

Educators and families also may not realise how important the environment is in 'affording' or 'hindering' children's play-based learning.

Claxton and Carr (2007 in Kennedy and Barblett, 2010) identified four different learning environments that support or hinder children's learning and wellbeing:

- Prohibiting environments which are over—controlled and constrained by timetables and restrictions on what can be done, where and when.
- Affording environments which provide opportunities for different ways of learning.
- Inviting environments which encourage active participation and collaboration.
- Potentiating environments which support sharing power between adults and children.

Perhaps, we need to take another look at our play environments and decide which categories they might fall into. We might ask: How can we make our environments *affording, inviting and potentiating*?

Claire Warden, from Scotland, in her Key Note at the ECA Conference, defined 'high affordance environments' as those where 'adults support, but children define when they're ready to take the next step or the next risk—this is the only way to build resilience and self efficacy'.

Lennie Barblett, in her Master Class on Play at the ECA Conference noted that environments need to be flexible, adaptable and *changing* to provide for the range of ages and abilities of children over the time they use them—some children encounter the same early learning environment for years!

*'How can we make our environments **affording, inviting and potentiating**?'*

Helping children to play inclusively

The EYLF recommends (p.15) that 'early childhood educators ... actively support the inclusion of all children in play, help children to recognise when play is unfair and offer constructive ways to build a caring, fair and inclusive learning community'.

Sometimes, if a conflict arises, it may seem easiest to ask children to 'be nice to their friends', to remove a piece of equipment that seems to be causing problems or to suggest that a child moves to another space.

Perhaps, we have to stop and ask ourselves:

- Do these strategies change children's long term behaviours?
- Do they help children to understand when their behaviour is unfair?
- Do they help excluded or reticent children to assert their right to play?
- Do they give marginalised children strategies for joining in play?.

What else could we do as adults to pass on the wisdom of our social experience and to build inclusive communities?





Fair play or not?

In the Forum, Judy asked a very interesting question about 'fair play'.

She gave the example of a toddler who established a settling process when separating from his mother:

He has a set of small cars he loves to play with. One morning, another toddler arrived and wanted the cars. Staff had different views about whether the first child should 'learn to share', whether the second child 'has the right to assume he can intrude on another child's deeply engrossing and satisfying play', and about 'what is fair' in this instance?

Respondents to Judy's dilemma had no easy answers. They agreed that negotiating with a child of that age is not an effective option, but that it is important to begin to explain to children about others' needs, so that over time, they learn empathy and tolerance.

The discussion seemed to come down to understanding the difference between 'equal' and 'equity'. 'Equal' implies that we treat all children the same; 'equitable' suggests that we treat children differently according to their needs.

Sally suggested that 'we can't always know what's right; all we can do is make a professional choice and accept responsibility for the choices that we make'.

The debate about play indicates that these are complex issues that educators need to read and think about, reflect, discuss and revisit.

The challenges of pop culture

Children may bring ideas or 'props' from home that come from popular culture. These props such as replica weapons and ideas such as aggressive storylines, may lead to behaviours that dominate or intimidate other children. It may be tempting for educators to simply to ban 'weapons' and associated games. The reality is, however, that such play is seductive, because it gives young children a sense of power which they usually lack in their lives (Feeney et al, 2010 in Kennedy and Barblett, 2010) and, if 'banned', the behaviours will simply 'go underground'.

Kennedy and Barblett suggest that educators use strategies such as:

- working with children and families to develop mutually agreed rules for bringing equipment from home and behaviour in games
- promoting popular culture characters and stories which challenge stereotypes
- supporting children to develop positive storylines about 'helping' and 'rescuing' rather than 'attacking'.

Conclusion

So, play-based learning isn't as simple as it first looks! Lennie in her Master Class described it as a 'dance'—a thoughtful, meaningful, intellectual activity that is shared between children and between children and adults. The trick is in knowing when to join the dance and how to follow the child's lead.

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