



# The Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program



## Talking about 'play'

### Introduction

*Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) was distributed to early childhood education and care services last year. Since then, early childhood practitioners in vastly different contexts have been grappling with what the EYLF means for them and their work with children and families.

The EYLF is Australia's first National Curriculum statement for educators working in early education and care settings with children from birth- to age five. The EYLF will enable a national conversation about what matters in early childhood education and what high quality early childhood practice looks like in the twenty-first century.

### The Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program

Because the EYLF will be so important in framing the work of early childhood services, Early Childhood Australia (ECA) has been funded by the Department of Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) to design and deliver an integrated suite of professional learning strategies to support the implementation of the EYLF.

This Professional Learning project has five elements:

- EYLF professional learning workshops across urban and regional Australia delivered by early childhood experts with high level knowledge and practical experience—scheduled for 2011.
- An EYLF online forum where issues arising in practice can be raised in supported professional conversation—[contribute now](#).



- Regular e-Newsletters which will share the challenges and opportunities practitioners experience as they engage with the EYLF, learn from the workshops and reflect on what they might do and change—this is the first!
- A set of EYLF Master Classes to be used by services with staff; and
- A series of film vignettes which capture effective practice in relation to the EYLF and provide stimulus for staff discussion.

The focus of this first e-Newsletter is on *play* because the idea of 'play as a legitimate space in which young children learn' has been a central belief for early childhood education over a very long time and because the role of play in children's learning has not always been fully understood.

### What do we know about play?

We know that '... play shapes the architecture of the brain in unique ways; it links social, creative and cognitive skills' (Bartlett, 2010)

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms '... play as a fundamental right of all children' (Article 31).

*The Early Years Learning Framework* (p. 46) defines play-based learning as:

*A context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations.*

This confirms that play is nationally and internationally valued for its contribution to young children's lives and learning. But, it doesn't tell us exactly what is meant by 'play' and what roles educators should fulfil as they interact with children in early learning settings.

If we are to defend the place of play in our early childhood programs, we need to be able to describe play in action and explain its value for children's learning.



## Challenging traditional notions of play

At the Early Childhood Australia National Conference *'Garla Bauondi': Fuelling the Fire* Dr Lennie Barblett, from Edith Cowan University in WA, presented a Master Class which began by challenging participants to '... find five words that describe play'. Educators present came up with words such as 'fun', 'enjoyable', 'exploring' and 'learning'. It was interesting to discover how difficult it was to fully describe play in terms that families might understand. It was particularly difficult to explain how play contributes to children's learning.

We have a number of commonplace 'slogans' in early childhood education and care such as 'play is children's work', but we need to stop and ask ourselves some questions:

- Is play always work, and valuable learning for children?
- Does it always need to be, or can it just be 'fun'?
- Does describing it as 'children's work' imply that we need to leave children to get on with it?
- Might there be times when we do just that and other times when it's helpful for adults to intervene?

Several Key Note speakers at the conference made important comments about play. Wendy Lee, a researcher and educator with forty years experience in New Zealand gave an inspiring talk titled: *Leading by the Heart and Soul*. Wendy spoke passionately about 'providing three- and four year olds with opportunities for self-directed, uninterrupted learning'. Claire Warden who is European education coordinator for the World Nature Collaborative and author of many books on outdoor environments (including *The Potential of a Puddle* (2005), available through ECA) reminded listeners that educators need to provide '... enabling environments that are provocative, open-ended and rich in possibilities and which encourage collaboration and reciprocity'.



## The characteristics of play

Drawing on the research of Dockett and Fler (1999), Shipley (2008) and Lester and Russell (2008) Dr Lennie Barblett put forward seven basic characteristics of play:

- **Voluntary**—something children choose to do, but other children can be invited to join in.
- **Pleasurable**—a deep sense of enjoyment, which will vary from child to child
- **Symbolic**—usually includes some type of make believe or pretend and objects assume new meanings and purposes for the player/s.
- **Meaningful**—to the player/s, but the meaning may not always be clear to an observer.
- **Active**—it requires active mental, verbal or physical engagement with people, objects or ideas.
- **Process oriented**—it's enjoyed for the activity itself, not concerned with an end product.
- **Intrinsically motivated**—it is its own reward.

If we see children wandering aimlessly from space to space, superficially engaging with pieces of equipment, does that play have the characteristics described above?

If we see some children dominating play and controlling other players, can we truly say that '... play is voluntary, pleasurable and active'?

Lennie asserted that '... just because children are in charge of play doesn't mean educators "just let children play"'. Educators have to be knowledgeable and active in children's play to ensure that it is an enjoyable and rewarding experience for *all* children and to maximise children's learning through play.

She quoted an instance where she, as educator, had assumed that girls had chosen not to play in the block corner—until she asked to join the boys. She was told quite definitely that '... girls can't build, but you can park the cars'. She had to re-think how equitable her play spaces really were!

## The role of educators in play

Lennie identifies five functions for early childhood educators in play:

- Quality adult-child interactions, including sustained shared thinking.
- Intentionality.
- Taking different roles directly in the play.
- Teaching to support play.
- Challenging unjust and unfair play.

'Sustained shared thinking' and 'intentionality' were the focus of two other Master Classes at the conference and they will be explored in future e-Newsletters. Intentionality includes knowing how to value-add to children's play by encouraging persistence and scaffolding to enable the child to complete a task such as a puzzle, for example.

Lennie talked about some of the roles educators can fulfil in children's play:

- **Parallel player**—working on the same tasks as the child, alongside.
- **Script writer**—helping to tell the story.
- **Stage manager**—providing space, materials, 'props', helping to resolve problems.
- **Co-constructor**—listening to what children are thinking and saying, asking clarifying questions, making suggestions.
- **Participating**—with children's agreement, taking a direct role in the play.
- **Modelling how to enter and exit someone else's play**—'... Let's go and ask Alex, can we join his play?'

The film clip that accompanied Lennie's talk showed an educator interacting with children who were playing with sand and water. By joining children in carrying buckets to and from the tap and asking questions, the educator extended children's understanding of mathematical concepts about weight and volume (wet sand weighs more and you can fit less sand in your bucket) and made the play more sophisticated and more lasting.



## Conclusion

If, as the research suggests, play is a vital tool for learning in early childhood, educators need to understand it deeply, so that they can provide:

- space, including flexible environments and open-ended materials
- time for uninterrupted and extended solitary and collaborative play
- appropriate extension to children's current understandings through sensitive interactions and interventions.

Educators need this deep knowledge to document and assess children's learning through play and to act as champions for children's right and need to play when communicating with families.

### Questions for staff discussion

- Do our current play environments 'provoke' children's sustained investigations?
- Are there intriguing things to investigate?
- Do we make best use of natural materials, both indoors and outdoors?
- Do children have 'agency' in relation to play—do they have a choice about whether they play inside or outside? Can they access equipment easily and choose items that may stretch their abilities and give them feelings of increased competence?
- Is the outdoor environment seen more as somewhere for children to 'let off steam' rather than 'to learn'?
- Is there a balance between child-initiated and educator-suggested activities?

- Is there a balance between safety and managed risk?
- Do we need to free-up our routines to create extended time for children to play and to return to unfinished play?
- How do we talk with families about the value of play?
- What do we need to know to be able to talk with families who worry that children should be 'learning to read and write'?

Dr Bartlett's valuable insights into play can be further explored through the Master Class video available [here](#), and through her forthcoming book with Dr Anne Kennedy in the *Research into Practice Series: The Early Years Learning Framework: Learning and teaching through play*.

### Take advantage of the EYLF PLP online forum

We encourage you to visit the EYLF PLP online forum—it is a wonderful opportunity for people to ask questions and leave comments about the EYLF. Your comments and questions really are important in strengthening the capacity of the sector to implement the EYLF.

[Visit the EYLF PLP forum](#)

#### Jenni Connor

Education Consultant and EYLF PLP Champion

### References

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Barblett, L. and Kennedy, A. (in press) *Learning and teaching through play supporting the Early Years Learning Framework, Research in Practice Series* Canberra: Early Childhood Australia.



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