



The Early Years  
Learning Framework  
Professional Learning Program



## Play-based Learning

### Lennie Barblett

#### Transcript

**Lennie Barblett:** The three underlying ideas of the *Early Years Learning Framework* are great ideas—Belonging, Being and Becoming. They're three interwoven ideas. One doesn't stand separate from the others. They're three together and they are all about children in the here and the now and the future.

The structure of the *Early Years Learning Framework*—and I'm going to hold it up here. Here it is. I hope you've got one and if you haven't then please get one while you're here. Some of you will have read it cover to cover and some of you perhaps have only just started. So let me point out just a few structures before we move onto what I'm most passionate and that's play.

In the structure, Joy Goodfellow calls this curriculum framework a conceptual framework. If you haven't seen her publication, then this is an Early Childhood Australia publication called *The Early Years Framework: Getting Started*. It's a great place to start in looking at the framework. She tells us that the *Early Year Learning Framework* is a conceptual skeleton that forms the way educators view children. It views children, their capabilities and how they learn. It provides a framework for us as educators to think about our work and shapes the way we think about children and their families.

So there are three main structures around these three big ideas. The first structure are the principles. These are the principles that educators hold and they're arrived from lots of research—nationally, internationally and of course in your own states. I'm not going to go into those today. Those principles, those pedagogical principles inform

our practice—the things that we do. That's what I'm here today to talk about—one of those practices—learning through play.

There are also five learning outcomes. These are the things that educators work towards when making decisions about the ways to promote young children's learning. I'm going to talk about those a little bit more today.

But we're here to talk about play. A fantastic context and process for learning for young children. So the first thing I'd like you to do is I'd like you to write down five words that describe play for you. You can only have five. You probably want a million. Just five words that describe play. Why am I asking you to try and describe play? It is because I think it's something we don't do well enough just yet and that's why we're here talking about it again. It's something we're all passionate about, but perhaps not as articulate as we would like to be.

So what words did you come up with? [replies from the audience]  
“Having fun”.. If you found it difficult to write down five words then let me tell you that even the researchers don't agree in how to describe play. So if we thought it was hard to describe—well it is actually. That is because it means different things to different people. But if we're going to use it as one of our practices and main ways in which children learn then we all have to, if we're working together, understand what we mean when we use the term play.

Now in early childhood we've often have little motherhood statements. Things like “play is children's work”. What does that mean? What do we want people to understand when we use the term play?

So the research literature tells us these things:—that play is voluntary. but that does not mean that children cannot be invited to, or suggested or asked to play. Play is pleasurable. It's that fun thing. How many people had fun as one of their words? That enjoyment quality? Yes, it is and isn't it great to watch?

Play is pleasurable. It's enjoyable. It's engaging. It does have challenges, fears and frustrations. However the quality of enjoyment is

something that stands out for players. It's symbolic. We have to learn all these things about play so that we can talk about it. It's pretend. It's that "what if", as if "type essence that we love to watch. Many activities are playful. The play has meaning to the player and sometimes does not hold any meaning to the observer.

It's active. Play requires physical, mental or verbal engagement with people, objects and ideas. So play is active. I might be looking like I'm passive when I'm playing but I might be manipulating ideas and constructing understandings.

It's process-oriented. That means that children play for the activity rather than the end product. It doesn't mean that we don't start with some end goal in mind but in play we know anything's open to suggestion and possibility.

It's intrinsically motivating. Play is its own reward when children have that sense of pleasure and well being in play. They want to do it over and over and over again.

But more importantly than all these things that we can list and put together, play is a fundamental right of all children in the world and I think we need to hold that very, very close to our hearts. Especially if you're working with older children and you're feeling at times that there's an academic push down in your curriculum. So this list, your list, our talk about play will show you that there's absolutely nothing simple about play. Play is complex.

So why play-based learning? Why pick this one as opposed to other ones that we can have? It's a good question. I'm sure most of you would have watched a lot of kids play. What they're doing, what they're thinking, what they're chatting about. But playing is lots and lots of things and unfortunately I don't have time to tell you absolutely everything. But I'd love to tell you about why play?—Why it's so important, and why it's included.

We know that play is a way of building and shaping the architecture of the brain in a very unique way. We know that imagining and imitating

are really complex cognitive processes. We know that there are links between socially active play and language and literacy learning. We know that play with others brings about deep social emotional development and relationship being and mental wellbeing. We know that there are links between play and creativity and divergent thinking skills. We know that there's great links between play and physical development. I could go on, but I shan't.

So what do children learn through play? I'd like you to have a look at this video and tell me what you think these children are learning through play.

**[Soundtrack of video clip]**

Child 1: Oh my goodness. Our chair.

Child 2: It melted.

Child 1: That's because **[Inaudible]**.

Child 2: Yes, uh, uh, uh.

Child 1: Then I'll make it again for you.

**[End of soundtrack of video clip]**

**Lennie Barblett:** Just a very small clip. What do you think those children were learning through play? Could someone tell me something they saw?

**[Inaudible] Replies from audience**

**Lennie Barblett:** Has to be louder because I'm way up here. (Lennie repeats audience replies) Relationships. Working together. Exploration. Quantity awareness. Pouring and measuring. Experimenting. Sensory. Lots of things we could see through learning through play. Hold that clip in your head—I'm going to come back to it in a moment.

So the EYLF describes 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. Now I'd also say that perhaps it's also a process for learning. Not just a context, but also a process.

But the EYLF is very strong in telling us that this is one of the major practice principles to which we have to pay attention. To which we actually have to intentionally think about. So this does not mean we just let children play. But we have to be articulate. We have to be knowledgeable and we have to be active of why this has a place in our program and such an important place.

The EYLF has suggested there are five outcomes. I'd like to use these outcomes a little differently today. I'd like to use them as a lens to view children. To have a look at their learning as where they're going and they're becoming. So with these lenses, children have a strong sense of identity. Children are connected and contribute to their world. Children have a strong sense of wellbeing. Children are confident and involved learners. Children are effective communicators. Each one of these outcomes has some very big ideas behind them and we really have to take the time to unpack them and have a good look inside.

But I'd like you now to pick one of those outcomes—hold it in your head? Have you got one? I'd like you to have a think what might be in that outcome. What sorts of things you might think children might show if they were showing this outcome, progressing towards this outcome. Now I'd like you to have a look at the video one more time again with that outcome in mind. Use it as a lens to watch these children play.

**[Soundtrack of video clip]**

Child 1: Oh my goodness. Our chair.

Child 2: It melted.

Child 1: That's because [Inaudible].

Child 2: Yes, uh, uh, uh.

Child 1: Then I'll make it again for you.

Child 2: Thank you.

**[End of soundtrack of video clip]**

**Lennie Barblett:** What outcome did you choose? What did you see? I chose an outcome. I chose number four—children are confident, involved learners. I dived back into the *Early Years Learning Framework* and this is what I saw that they said and what I saw when I have looked at this play.

They said children are curious and enthusiastic participants. Do you think that's true? They said, that they show imagination and investigate. Was that true? They said that they develop a range of enquiry and problem solving skills. They said—and I do like this because I do like those toddlers in that play—that they mirror and practise actions of others around them. Did you see that little chap doing the same thing as the bigger chaps? They explore others and the purpose and function of a range of tools.

So I invite you, in getting to know the *Early Years Learning Framework*, to get to understand the principles, the practices. Then use the outcomes as a lens to look at children and their play.

I'd like you—no, we're going back. Sorry. Technology—don't you love it?

I'd like now to talk about the role of the early childhood educator and play. As I say, I could stand here for days and wax lyrical about the joys of play and all that's associated with it. But in forty-five minutes it's quite difficult. So I've chosen a couple of things that I'd like to talk to you about today in being articulate and passionate champion for play.

One is the role that the early childhood educator has in play. I really ask you to go back to your setting and have a good conversation with your colleagues about the role you take in play. Because they are many and they are varied. But they have to be intentional and they have to be thought about to get the best out of the play experience. Now the first thing I want to say is that you're not needed in every play episode, may I say? Children need time and space for their own constructions, their own understandings and their own peace of mind.

But there will be times, those teachable moments, when you think that you can value-add to what is going on. It won't be all the time but there'll be times, special times, through your observations and knowing your children well, that you will be able to do something to increase the learning through play. So what do you need to know?

Well the first thing is you have to know your children, do you not? And you have to listen—very carefully—to what they say and their thinking. We talked at some of the sessions about there's chatter and there's listening to children's talk. They're two different things. You very much have to think what children are saying and how they're constructing their understandings. Now knowing them as you do, you should know what learning they have prior to this and how you might be able to help them along their way.

The Reggio Emilia pedagogistas talk about a dance that educators have with children. I think it's just a beautiful metaphor. It's a partnership in learning. It's not something someone does by themselves in this social context of our setting. So when you think about the dance—and I do like it—you listen. You listen to the music the children are giving you through their talk and through their actions. Then you might dance back. That might mean that you talk to them or you provide something else—a scaffold for their learning. I'm going to talk about what some of those things could look like. Then the dance continues until the partnership is grown and the understanding is built together. I think it's a lovely way of thinking about teaching children.

So, let's talk about the intentionality. It's very important that those intentionalities that you have in play are differentiated—it's going to look different. Play looks different for different ages, groups, does it not? You would no sooner set out a game of chess for two-year olds—yes? Than you would give the eight-year olds who love rules and games something that you'd just give perhaps to a baby. Not saying that people don't like all different types of play, of course they do. But we know there's different intellectual, social and physical skills involved in different levels of play. So you need to know about play,

the types of play, what children bring to play. Then, only then, can you think about how you can help that quality play frame.

Okay, the other one that we know so well in our settings are those interactions that we have. Iram Siraj-Blatchford calls these types of interactions shared sustained thinking. So she says to us, let us just think about what it is we bring when you're trying to help children with their knowledge or their skill development. It is very much that we construct these understandings together. It's when—shared sustained thinking is when two individuals together, in an intellectual way, solve a problem or clarify a concept.

So I need you to think, the next time you're sitting watching some children play and you think you might intervene or play with or be a participant. What are you bringing to that play? What is it that you want those children to know or understand or maybe be able to do through this great process—which is theirs—which is the context of play? How are you intervening? Is it a meaningful intervention or are you just in their way? You need to think very carefully.

We need to make sure that we take different roles in children's play. Sometimes we will be a participant, but I don't want you to think you have a starring role. Yes, it's not your play. I don't know if you've ever seen an adult—and I just, sometimes I go into centres and I think, 'oh I'm not actually here to see you. I'm here to watch the kids and what they're doing'. You have to make sure that you match how you're joining the play in a way that is very compatible to the players and the play. So you're not suddenly going to take over the play and imagine all these sorts of things.

The other thing you might like to think about is being a parallel player. Especially for the younger children. Not actually being part of their play but sitting alongside and playing, even imitating what they're doing. Then introduce something different into what you're doing—maybe block building and you use something in a different way and

you just sit next to the children. You know, if you do that and have a go at it you know they start to watch you and you can have this parallel play together.

The other role you might like to take in your play is that of scriptwriter. In these vignettes that Early Childhood Australia have filmed in the every day practices—lots of early childhood settings—there's a great little clip about a qualified worker in a toddler outdoor area. She is telling the story of the three little pigs so everyone can act it out with her as they go along. Now the play is fantastic. But she's actually the scriptwriter. She's telling the story and everyone's running from one house to the other and all huffing and puffing as the characters. Now they're able to sustain and maintain that play because she's able to provide a script for their play. Now again, it's not something you'd do every day or you'd be exhausted and so would the kids. It's something you might do at a special moment.

Stage manager in play. Now often I'm sure you've done this role, but it again needs to be very thoughtful and intentional. You might have some kids squabbling over a particular item that we need more of in the play. You might have to organise space and time. You might have to come back and resolve conflicts with them. But the thinking 'is that what you can do in supporting their play?' Maybe insert something just on the bench or next to where they're playing that would bring them another level in their play or take them to a different place. Definitely a stage manager is in charge of inserting props, anticipating spatial arrangements and organising the timetable—which I want to come back to in a moment.

Play assistant. There's times that you might need to be a play tutor as well. I don't know if you've ever seen children who actually do not know how to enter play or be part of the play? Then that's your job. That's your job—is to invite them in a way that can help them gain skills and entry into a group. Sometimes you might need to be that participant as well to just help them with the play as it goes along.

Teaching to support play. One of the other lectures today is about intentional teaching. It's something that we really again need to give great thought to. We might be watching play. For example, we might be seeing some children in the sand pit making bricks, mud bricks—four year olds making bricks. One child comes up to them and says, “that's not how you make bricks. I know—my dad makes bricks. You don't do it like this”. You might ponder on that for a moment and you might think, ‘okay perhaps this is a point in time where we need to enquire how to make bricks. Do any of you know how to make bricks?’

It might be something happens in the play that you go away and you think I need more knowledge about this. If I'm intentionally going to provide some information or some skill then I might need to go away and research this so I can help them take their play to another level.

The last one I want to talk about is that play is not always fair, is it? It can be very unkind at times. I know that we see the play where it's very challenging and children are not very nice to each other and exclude. But sometimes in play its not that easy to spot those types of challenging and unfair plays. I'd like to tell you just a little story.

I was asked to be part of a research program to look at gender equity in my kindergarten class. I was thrilled because I thought I ran a pretty good kindergarten class. I thought, bring it on. Come on in. I do marvellous stuff here. So in they came and they said, ‘Lennie, what we'd like you to do is spend half an hour in the block corner.’ I thought, ‘oh okay. That's okay, I can do that.’ So I went to the block corner and I had one group of particular boys who were in there every day building wonderful, wonderful things. So I said, ‘I've come to play’. They said, ‘oh goodo.’ They were quite articulate young men. I said, ‘I've come to play—what can I build?’ They all looked at each other and looked at me and said, “‘build?’” I went, ‘yes I'm here to build.’ ‘Oh no.’ I went, ‘sorry?’ They said, ‘you're a girl.’ I was so shocked that this was happening in my centre—my beautiful, wonderful practice centre. These boys—quite kindly, there was no argy-bargey—had obviously been excluding the girls. I had thought that the girls

were making choices for themselves but it wasn't to be. These boys, in a nice way, were saying, 'well no this is your job because you're a girl.' I had to park the cars. I can't tell you how boring that was. So I want you to understand that you will see when play's unfair and unkind. But sometimes play can be unkind and unfair in really insidious, quiet ways and as the leader in the room, you must investigate.

I'm going to show you another clip and I'd like to thank this Family Day Carer for this wonderful every day practice that she shared with us. I'd like you to watch this educator in this clip and I'd like to ask yourself two questions—what was her intention in the children's play and what role? Thinking about some of the roles we've talked about—what was her role in children's play?

**[Soundtrack of video clip]**

Child: [Inaudible] Ruth.

Ruth: What is it? Oh. Hey guys, if I put this on here...

Child: Yes.

Ruth: ...can you work out—if you put sand in here and sand in here—which one's the heaviest? Or we put water in—that might grow. Leave that one there so we can put some in. Let's see which side's the heaviest. You know how it goes up and down like this? Let's see if we can make a big hump. So we need more sand in here than is in that side. See if you can do that?

Child: I can't get it up.

Ruth: You can use this wet sand because wet sand is heavier because it's got water in it.

Child: No.

Ruth: No you don't want to or...

Child: No, it's so level...

Ruth: Where's the scoop? We'll get some scoops.

Child: Here.

Ruth: Because the wet sand will be heavier than the dry sand because it's got water in it and water makes it heavy.

Child: We have put wet sand in there. It made it heavier.

Ruth: Did it? Did it go up?

Child: Yes.

Ruth: Let me have a look. Oh it did. It went right down. So we need some more in this one to make it go back up again.

**[End of soundtrack of video clip]**

Speaker: As I say, not scripted. Just an every day practice where that educator is intentionally thinking about what she could bring to that play sequence. Don't you like—you didn't see the first bit but she spent a good 15 minutes just watching the play and picking her time. She knew that if she did intervene the play could go on longer and be a little bit more sophisticated. What's that doing there? Just trying to get to the next slide—okay.

Now, environment. I don't have time as they say to pick on lots and lots of things so I'd like to just talk to you a little bit about the environment. Because it's another passion of mine and it is very, very important. Indoor and outdoor environments should be set up for play-based learning and they're equally important in a young child's life. So how to begin planning? Well here we are. It's everybody's space, is it not?

The other thing that I'm really quite excited about in the whole quality framework is this idea about bringing back, and placing high on our agenda, natural products. Children have an affinity with nature and we should very be bringing it to the fore. So where possible we should be saying, this space belongs to everybody and everybody should have ideas and be asked about how it should be set up. What ideas and thoughts and suggestions are there? How can you reflect the community in your environment?

Being, Belonging and Becoming. Great ideas, great ideas. I've worked with the Curriculum Council in Western Australia so I go across all sectors. A high school principal said me the other day, he goes, this new Australian Curriculum that's coming—why couldn't they have these ideas? This is all children—Being, Becoming and Belonging. Great ideas and it should be reflected in the environment.

Being affirms a child's right to play without undue focus on adult desired goals for activities. So have a good look around your centre and there should be a fine balance between child initiated play activities and teacher directed or educator directed. Have a good look at what you're doing and what you're calling play. Because I've been in some centres and what they call play-based learning is not. Be very careful. Have a good look.

Beauty. Your environment should be beautiful. Young children all across our world deserve beauty in their life and it should surround them. There should be an emphasis on natural products for play and I think it's important that we get that right.

Empowerment and agency. Agency for some people is a new word. It's a new word but I don't think that it's a new notion. The idea that children are competent and capable—that they can make decisions. Little kids can make decisions that affect them. Then it's a new way of setting up and thinking about how your environment is set up.

I saw a wonderful picture from a service that [Catharine Hyden] sent me from Victoria. It was a picture of a toddler at a door to the storeroom. On the door of the storeroom they had all the things that were in the storeroom that children could play with, but they didn't have enough room to put them around the centre. Here was this toddler at the door pointing at what she would like to play with—at 18 months. Now what a sense of empowerment is that in the environment for play?

So in the way we position things in our environment. The access, the equipment, the resources do not have to be whiz bang. We know that

children prefer simpler things to play with. But we have to respect children's agency and sense of empowerment. All spaces communicate. It's very important when you go back and look at your setting that your setting communicates everyone is welcome here and play is something that we respect and cherish. Can you see that in your setting—the way it's set up? Or is play something that I allow you to do? Who belongs here? Who has power in this setting?

Provocations are great things to set up for all ages. Things to pull apart. Things to promote thinking. Things that we can be curious about and use those great enquiries of problem solving.

The temporal environment. A big word. Nothing to be ashamed of. It just means that you're in charge of the time. Do your children have time to play? Or are we so quickly getting around in our routines and the doing of the things that we quickly get lost? Again, I'm going to mention a service in WA—at Unicare. They challenged their educators to take the clocks off the wall. They challenged their educators to take the program down and have a look at what the natural cadence of children's lives look like. Some of their educators said, "but when will we have lunch?" Well when the kids are hungry. "When will we know when it's going home time?" Well we'll come and tell you 10 minutes before. But I challenge you to have a little bit of a go.

There's the thinking—we often say we can't do things because of safety and risk. We really have to rethink what that fine line looks like. because we are tied up in regulations and I do totally understand that. But there needs to be risk taking in play, just as there is in learning.

Okay, so let's have one last look at our educator here. Ask yourself—how has this educator structured the environment to get the most out of this play situation? Let's have a look.

**[Soundtrack of video clip]**

Child 1: Wet water will do it, wet, wet. Put it in here.

Child 2: How come?

Ruth: Whoa.

Child 1: Our one's going to win. Our team's going to win.

Child 2: Yes.

Ruth: Oh so I've got to put it in the other one, do I?

Child 1: Yes.

Ruth: Okay.

Child 2: You're in the baby's pool.

Ruth: Brady, can you help me put—oh good Brady, you help Ruthie. We'll make this one heavier.

Child 1: Now you'll never win the other one. Wet.

Ruth: Other one Brady. Oh, two. Let's see how many I need to do.

Child 2: [Inaudible]

Ruth: Three. Oh you want to do one too? Goodo. Brady's having a turn too?

Child 2: Yes, that's getting full. Do you want to do it?

Child 1: No.

**[End of soundtrack of video clip]**

**Lennie Barblett:** It's a great clip, isn't it? I just love the other toddler, who's not involved in the play but quite happy alongside, doing his own thing. How did the educator structure the environment for play? What was she thinking about when she put things out? She was thinking about where the play might go and that she had different ages there. Different ranges of intellectual capacity there. She had a little bit for everyone, didn't she?

So you need to go back and think, 'am I providing for differentiations in play? Am I providing for quality engagement?' Big questions to think about.

That's all we actually have time for today in doing this. But I would like to say to you, I'd like to thank this family day care carer for sharing her

practice. It's very intimidating have a camera on top of you. I don't know if you've ever done it? It's a good practice.

But I'd like you to do a couple of things for me. I'd like you to make sure that you have a copy—if you do not already—because this is a national document. While we might be uncertain in times of change and what the quality framework might look like, this is a shining beacon because this gives us a tool to talk the same language nationally.

So I'd like to thank you for today. If you have any questions, we don't have time for a lot of questions but I'm happy to talk to people down here. Pam's looking at me. Right. Pam would like me to tell you—and I have already, she just obviously wasn't here—you can get a copy of the EYLF at the *Early Years Learning Framework* stand in the hall. That this lecture will be copied—as will the other three—and will be online.

The other thing that is in the Professional Learning Program is an online forum. There are going to be some early childhood champions who will be at your beck and call. If you have any questions there will be an online forum. You can pick up the website from the stand as well and you can start already asking questions. Alright? Thank you very much for your time today.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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Early Childhood  
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A voice for young children

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