

Learning and teaching through play

Supporting the Early Years Learning Framework

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**The Early Years
Learning Framework
Professional Learning Program**



**Early Childhood
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Research in Practice Series

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Introduction

This book is the third in the Research in Practice Series which is designed to complement *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). The first publication, *The Early Years Learning Framework: Getting started* (Goodfellow, 2009), encourages educators to consider multiple starting points for engaging with the national early learning framework. The second publication in the series, *The Early Years Learning Framework: Building confident learners* (Arthur, 2010), explores different ways to help children become confident learners. This publication, *The Early Years Learning Framework: Learning and teaching through play*, discusses how play-based learning approaches in the EYLF are critical to promoting children's progress towards learning outcomes.

This book will assist educators to examine their understandings of play and how play-based approaches require intentional planning and teaching in order to support and extend children's learning. Throughout

the book there are practice examples and questions for critical reflection and discussion with colleagues. The critical reflection tasks are designed to support educators, in constructing shared understandings of how to use play-based learning and teaching to promote the principles, practices and outcomes of the EYLF.

The EYLF is built on a vision that 'all children experience learning that is engaging and builds success for later life' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 10). Underpinning this vision are the interwoven ideas of *belonging, being and becoming*. To realise the vision there are three interlinked components of the EYLF:

- ◆ principles concerned with how young children learn and how to support their learning
- ◆ practice which is underpinned by the principles
- ◆ five learning outcomes highlighting the complex and integrated nature of young children's learning.

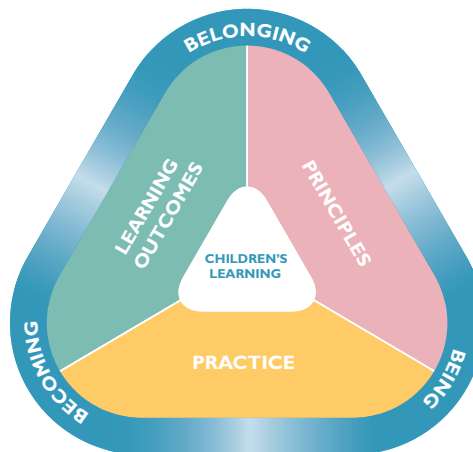


Figure 1: Elements of the Early Years Learning Framework
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments (2009). *Belonging Being & Becoming: The Early Years Framework for Australia*, p. 10. © Commonwealth of Australia (used with permission).

Practice elements in the EYLF

Educators draw on their values, professional knowledge and skills as they pay close attention to the interrelated pedagogical practices outlined in the *Early Years Learning Framework*:

- ◆ holistic approaches
- ◆ responsiveness to children
- ◆ **learning through play**
- ◆ learning environments
- ◆ intentional teaching
- ◆ cultural competence
- ◆ continuity of learning and transitions
- ◆ assessment for learning.

Planning and teaching for learning through play has long been considered a key feature of early childhood education—a feature which distinguishes it from other sectors of education and is deeply grounded in our history. The EYLF has a specific emphasis on play-based learning and teaching. It acknowledges that children have a right to play under the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989).

‘The EYLF has a specific emphasis on play-based learning and teaching.’



Play-based learning in the EYLF

The Early Years Learning Framework 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'
(DEEWR, 2009, p. 46).

This definition links with the notions of *belonging*, *being* and *becoming* which are underpinning motifs in the EYLF. One of the most important ways children make sense of their social worlds is through playing with others. Social play helps children to develop a sense of belonging in a group as they interact with others and learn how to negotiate rules for positive social interactions. The development of a positive sense of self is promoted through early play experiences because there are no wrong or right ways to do things. This freedom from rules helps children to feel confident and competent as learners and teachers of others (Learning Outcomes 1 and 4).

Being affirms children's right to play and to enjoy their childhoods without the pressure of conforming to narrow goals for learning which have been predetermined by adults. When educators respect children's *being*, they focus on children's lives in the here and now and support children's understanding of their uniqueness and worth as individuals and contributors in the groups where they belong. Play provides opportunities for children to learn about themselves (their *being*) and others (Learning Outcomes 1, 2 and 4).

As children develop, the values, knowledge and skills they gain provide the foundations for the next phase. In this sense, children are both being and becoming at the same time. Children who have had stories told or read to them from infancy, and who are encouraged to engage with stories in books and through social play for example, are being literate as they pretend to read a book to a teddy. At the same time they are learning foundational skills and knowledge about how books and stories work which helps them to become literate in the formal sense when they read the words in books.

Critical reflection: **Respecting a child's being**

An educator at a childcare centre observes that Ben (aged 18 months) enjoys tipping items out of a basket and putting them into a small pram. After Ben pushes the pram to the other side of the room, he tips all the items onto the mat and then replaces them in the pram one by one. Ben likes to repeat this game again and again. Reflect on these questions and discuss your reflections with colleagues:

- ◆ How would you describe Ben's personal learning agenda or interest?
- ◆ What might Ben be learning from this self-motivating, enjoyable and repeated play experience?
- ◆ How could the educator share Ben's learning with his family?
- ◆ How could the educator support or promote Ben's learning agenda?

Learning through play

Play is something in which humans of all ages from diverse cultures engage, although the purpose for and the type of play may be different across ages and cultures. Relationships between children and with adults are central to learning and teaching through play. Two-way interactions and the exchange of ideas and thinking between children and adults in play contexts influence children's continued motivation, sustained interest in the experience and what they learn. A child's intense interest in watching some snails when he is playing in the garden can be sustained by an adult sharing his interest and asking questions or making comments as they observe the snails together. Using questions such as, 'Where do you think the snails are going?'; 'How do the snails move?'; 'Look Oliver, can you see a trail where the snail has been?' will help to keep Oliver interested and extend his understandings about snails.

There is considerable research on the benefits of play for children's learning across all areas of development.

Cognitive and creativity outcomes

Play is associated with the development of intellectual skills and understandings. In play experiences children integrate emotions, thinking and motivation that establish neural connections critical to effective brain functioning (Lester & Russell, 2008). When children play they use imagination and imitation which requires complex cognitive or intellectual processes. The development of cognitive skills, including dispositions for learning (such as curiosity and persistence), memory and thinking skills, and language and literacy skills, have strong links to play (Bodrova & Leong, 2005) (links with Learning Outcomes 3, 4 and 5).

Play is associated with the development of creative skills. Play fosters creativity of thought, imagination, strategies for problem solving and the development of divergent thinking ability (Lester & Russell, 2008, p. 34) (links with Learning Outcomes 1, 4 and 5).

'Creativity seems to express itself through cognitive, affective, and imaginative processes. These come together and support the skills for predicting and arriving at unexpected solutions'

(Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 76)



Children gain deep satisfaction engaging in painting as they use their imagination and think about how to design or create something original that has meaning for them.

Social and emotional outcomes

Play is associated with the development of social and emotional skills and understandings. Research shows that play assists children in building social skills that support positive relationships. Playing also helps to teach children how to regulate their behaviour, and understand others' feelings, as well as promoting a sense of independence.

Early play experiences between adults and very young children have a central role in developing strong attachments in children (Lester & Russell, 2008). Emotional competence and empathy are developed through play experiences as children become aware of their own and others' emotions, motivations and desires. Through collaborating and cooperating in play, children learn how to negotiate and problem solve their personal dilemmas (links with Learning Outcomes 1, 2 and 3).

Wellbeing outcomes

Play is associated with increased feelings of wellbeing which lead to good mental health outcomes. The pleasure and satisfaction associated with play and the freedom from pressure to perform in play supports the development of a strong sense of wellbeing (Gordon, O'Toole & Whitman, 2008) (links with Learning Outcomes 1, 2 and 3).

Physical outcomes

Play is associated with physical health. Physically active play is related to the development of physical skills and the increased health benefits of improved metabolism and energy expenditure (Lester & Russell, 2008; Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2006) (links with Learning Outcomes 1 and 3).

'Emotional competence and empathy are developed through play experiences ...'

Critical reflection: Play and learning

Work with your colleagues to critically reflect on these questions. Develop responses to each question:

- ◆ Discuss with your colleagues your understandings about play. Develop a shared understanding through this discussion.
- ◆ What types of learning do children gain from play in your program?
- ◆ How does children's learning through play connect with the learning outcomes in the EYLF?
- ◆ How do you describe the purpose of play in your program to families and other professionals? Is this information clearly understood?
- ◆ How could you improve your communicating about the purpose and benefits of play for children?
- ◆ Brainstorm ways to use your reflections; for example, to focus discussion in team meetings and plan actions as a result.

Planning play environments for learning

Creating secure, safe and challenging environments that promote play interactions and learning is fundamental for achieving and maintaining quality early childhood education programs. In planning play environments for learning, educators need to consider:



- ◆ the components of the physical environment (which include furniture, resources, lighting and acoustics) and how physical elements such as these can support or hinder play. For example, using a reading lamp attached to a table can help focus children's attention on the play materials they are using
- ◆ provocations for learning which invite sensory exploration and investigation using a range of resources, media and technologies. A beautiful collection of shells displayed with non-fiction books on shells, for example, can invite and provoke children's interest and learning
- ◆ aesthetics or the beauty which will surround children and adults in the environment
- ◆ positioning equipment and resources so that children can access them safely and in ways that respect their agency and competency. Ensuring that very young children can access toys they want to play with by placing them on low shelves or in baskets on the floor supports children's capacity to make choices, which is agency in action
- ◆ providing equipment and resources which children can use in multiple ways to promote exploration and creativity. Large wooden blocks, for example, promote exploration and creativity. Blocks can be used in many ways—indoors and outdoors—and by children across a wide age range

- ◆ providing a safe physical, social and emotional environment so that children learn to take appropriate risks in learning and exploration. For example, educators providing children with the opportunity to extend their physical skills with a new climbing experience would monitor the activity closely, while encouraging children to 'have a go'. The adults' physical closeness helps children to take safe risks as they attempt the new experience
- ◆ planning the daily timetable so that children have large blocks of time to develop quality play themes and experiences
- ◆ collaborating with children, families and others to regularly assess the environment to ensure it promotes quality play-based learning experiences. In one centre the staff, children and families undertake an annual 'audit' of the outdoor playground, which provides information about what aspects are working well, where there could be improvements to promote children's safety and learning, and how any proposed changes could be achieved. The 'audit' includes taking photographs of the outdoor environment, talking with children and families, and focused discussions at staff meetings. One audit process resulted in the establishment of a 'sensory' garden with fragrant bushes and herbs, plants with interesting leaf textures and wind chimes hanging from a tree
- ◆ ensuring children have daily access to natural materials in both indoor and outdoor environments
- ◆ making a variety of media available that children can explore and use to represent or express ideas
- ◆ documenting play experiences around the room for children and others who work with the children to reflect upon.

'Providing equipment and resources which children can use in multiple ways ...'

Critical reflection: **Learning environments**

Use the criteria for planning learning environments provided here to focus your thinking on the learning environments in your setting and how they support or hinder learning.

Identify actions you will take to support your reflections. For example:

- ◆ find a website which could provide practical ideas on planning learning environments. For example, ECA's website (www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au) has links to other sites which could be helpful.
- ◆ find some professional readings on planning learning environments which can be shared with all the staff and with families. For example, the RIPS booklet, *Portfolios: Documenting a journey* (Nolan & Reynolds, 2008) would be helpful in thinking about how to display documentation of children's learning so that children and others can reflect on it.

Identify the changes that you have made to the environments as a result of your reflections and actions.



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Early Years Learning Framework resources

Resources specifically designed to support you in implementing and understanding the Early Years Learning Framework.



The Early Years Learning Framework: Stars are made of glass—Children as capable and creative communicators

This book focuses on *Learning Outcome 5 of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)* for Australia and explores how children communicate and express themselves through different means and ideas whether through language, music, movement or images.

Authors: Leonie Arthur, Felicity McArdle and Marina Papic. 32 pages.

Price: \$14.95



The Early Years Learning Framework: Building confident learners

Explores how educators can help children to be confident and involved learners, focusing on Outcome 4 of the first national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australia.

Author: Leonie Arthur. 28 pages.

Price: \$14.95



Every Child Vol. 15 No. 4—Early Years Learning Framework

This issue focuses on the EYLF, with several key articles on key aspects of the Framework, as well as a 'how to' emphasis, where it is relevant. It will help you understand how you can approach it, as well as what it can mean for your service, your practice and your families.

Authors: Various. 36 pages.

Price: \$14.95



Every Child Vol 16 No 1—Belonging

The informative and easy-to-read articles in this issue focus especially on the notion of being and belonging, including articles on developing inclusive relationships among early childhood staff, connecting behaviour with belonging, encouraging families to belong, the challenges of starting a new service, and much more ...

Authors: Various. 36 pages.

Price: \$14.95

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The Early Years Learning Framework: Learning and teaching through play

The Early Years Learning Framework: *Learning and teaching through play* focuses on *The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australia* and explains how educators examine their understandings of play and how play-based approaches require intentional planning and teaching in order to support and extend children's learning.

Throughout the book there are practice examples and questions for critical reflection and discussion with colleagues. The critical reflection tasks are designed to support educators, in constructing shared understandings of how to use play-based learning and teaching to promote the principles, practices and outcomes of the EYLF.

This book will help you understand:

- learning through play
- learning environments
- intentional teaching
- cultural competence
- continuity of learning and transitions
- assessment for learning.

The Early Years Learning Framework: Learning and teaching through play is the third in the Research in Practice Series about the EYLF to be published by Early Childhood Australia.

While these are practical guidebooks for educators, they may also be of interest to families and others who work closely with young children.



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