



Playwork at **Forrest** Out of School Hours Care (FOOSHC)

In this article, the **FOOSHC team** discusses the Playwork Principles, which the service has embedded in its practice, resulting in strong developmental outcomes for children and awards for excellence.

Forrest Out of School Hours Care (FOOSHC), rated 'Excellent' under the *National Quality Standard*, is a community-based, not-for-profit service in Canberra run by a volunteer Parents and Citizens Committee. The service can accommodate 150 children and offers before and after school care and a well-attended school holiday program catering for approximately 420 children who attend across the holidays. Over two-thirds of the school's population have enrolled since significant changes were made to the service's philosophy and program. Feedback from our families suggests FOOSHC's program is one of the key reasons for choosing us as their child's school.

Playwork has underpinned FOOSHC's pedagogical practice since 2014, when the service started exploring nature pedagogy. This shift in philosophy saw the birth of the 'Beyond the Fence' program, which centred on the idea of taking children out into nature and giving them the time, space and freedom to play and simply be. After copious hours of reading and study tours in the US, UK and Australia, the service's Educational Leader discovered a pedagogical method without realising they had been using it all along: Playwork. Over the past eight years, Playwork has become deeply embedded in FOOSHC's educational practice and is largely responsible for its Excellent rating in 2019 and again in 2021.





FOOSHC's philosophy states, 'FOOSHC is a place in which play takes priority because all children have the right to play, as such; our program is to plan for the possibilities of play. Our pedagogical practice is based on a Playwork approach which sees children as the constructors of their own experience.' Embedding Playwork through a process of critical reflection ensures that the service upholds Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989), which states all children have a right to play.

FOOSHC's approach to Playwork is guided by the Playwork Principles (PPSGC, 2005). Principle 1 states, 'All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well being of individuals and communities.' Considering this principle encouraged FOOSHC to identify the correlations between Playwork and the Australian learning framework, *My time, our place* (MTOP) (ACECQA, 2018). There are several misconceptions about Playwork, principally that it does not align with MTOP or the *National Quality Standard*. FOOSHC continues to challenge this idea, most recently at the Playwork Gathering in Queensland, where Dr Jennifer Cartmel facilitated a session encouraging participants to replace the examples MTOP lists under each learning outcome with their own using a Playwork lens. This session demonstrated how Playwork intertwines with MTOP.

Another common misconception about Playwork is that it allows children to do whatever they want without adults intervening. However, Playwork Principle 8 states, 'Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the development benefit and well being of children' (PPSGC, 2005). At FOOSHC, this process is guided by a Dynamic Risk-Benefit Assessment cycle (DRBA), which supports eight core Risk-Benefit Assessments (RBA) covering several aspects of practice.

FOOSHC occasionally hears that educators at other services are reluctant to engage with Playwork since they believe it might adversely affect their relationships with children. In reality, it is through this unique way of supporting children's right to play that more meaningful relationships are formed, resulting in children gaining a deeper sense of belonging and ownership of their space. Playwork fosters trust, as children's play is protected and their opinions and rights are upheld and valued by the educators.



At FOOSHC, play is child-led. Playwork Principle 2 states, 'Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons' (PPSGC, 2005). FOOSHC educators observe and facilitate play spaces that support the play cycle, ensuring—through DRBAs—that these offer both the right physical and psychological conditions for play frames to emerge and for all children to play. This not only requires a consideration of the resources provided, but how and where they are placed, the space itself, other play frames within the space, where educators are positioned and how they move, without adulterating the children's play. When planning for the possibilities of play, educators will inevitably be faced with themes and concepts that might be confronting. However, it is recognised that play is an effective process for children to understand and make sense of their world, and so strategies are adopted to ensure that their play is protected. This may include arranging to have additional educators in the space to ensure other children and play frames are not negatively impacted or supporting educators to 'tag in and out' of play spaces.



In upholding Playwork Principle 2, educators empower children to take more risks. The benefits of this, as FOOSHC identifies in its RBAs, include the development of their sense of identity, agency and autonomy, as well as of their brains and proprioceptive (muscles and joints) and vestibular (balance and orientation) systems. One way to establish beneficial physical conditions and give children the opportunity to explore risk is through the provision of loose parts—mixed materials that can be manipulated in unique ways. It is through the use of loose parts that educators most often see one of the greatest benefits of facilitating risk-taking in play: the children themselves begin to explore and strengthen their understanding of assessing risk. Eventually, this helps them to develop the skills to apply the DRBA cycle themselves.

Playwork Principle 3 states, ‘The prime focus and essence of Playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education’ (PPSGC, 2005). FOOSHC educators undergo extensive professional development, which includes a three-month induction process, three internal professional development sessions each term, as well as individual dynamic coaching and mentoring sessions with the Educational Leader. The position of Educational Leader at FOOSHC is structured in such a way that they work solely out of ratio so that they can be where they are needed, spontaneously and in the moment, to guide and support the educators through their daily practice.

Key components of FOOSHC’s philosophy are advocacy and leadership. Educators invest their time not only in furthering their understanding and development of Playwork knowledge, but also in sharing and advocating for it with others. The Educational Leader has embarked on three study tours focusing on Playwork in the US and UK as well as within Australia. To make these valuable experiences available to the entire team, FOOSHC began a Playworker in Residence program in 2018, enabling a visiting playworker to join FOOSHC for a week, coaching and mentoring educators on the floor, facilitating professional development and furthering the team’s knowledge and understanding of Playwork. FOOSHC has seen its educators attend and present at Australia’s Play and Playwork conferences and Playwork Gatherings, and has become an integral part of Australia’s Playwork community.

References

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