



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

EARLY CHILDHOOD AUSTRALIA'S
STATEMENT ON

play



ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD AUSTRALIA

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is the peak advocacy organisation for young children (birth to eight years). We work at both the national and local level, with active state and territory committees in each Australian jurisdiction and a National Board of Directors.

Our membership includes early childhood professionals, services, schools and organisations that share a commitment to the rights and wellbeing of young children.

Our vision is that every child is thriving and learning. To achieve this, we champion the rights of young children to thrive and learn at home, in the community, within early learning settings and through the early years of school.

ABOUT THE STATEMENT ON PLAY

In 2019, ECA convened a multidisciplinary Advisory Group, with national and international expertise (find more details at www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eca-statement-on-play), to advise on ECA's first *Statement on Play* for the early childhood sector. The Advisory Group, many critical friends and contributors helped discuss and sift ideas, identify evidence, resources and gaps in understanding and practice. ECA thanks all who contributed to and shaped our thinking.

The Statement reflects ECA's commitment to protect and promote the right of every child in Australia to play. It also builds on ECA's previous work on the rights of the child, inclusivity, digital play, equality (along with SNAICC—National Voice for Our Children) and particularly on the ECA WA Play Strategy.

The Statement draws on robust evidence from diverse disciplines on the essential nature of play and its impact on every child's wellbeing, learning and development. It contains important work by Australian and international researchers and practitioners as well as the efforts of international and national bodies to recognise the importance of play to children.

These include the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, *General Comment No 17 on the Child's Right to Play*, the International Play Association, the World Health Organization and the *Learning Through Play* advocacy brief by UNICEF and the LEGO Foundation. Sources cited are listed at the end of this Statement and each principle has a section on follow-up resources. For a wider range of references, research and guides on play, play theorists and practice, go to ECA's play resources page: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eca-statement-on-play.

ECA recognises the need to continue building on this Statement, develop more culturally nuanced understandings of play, and invest in educator play resources. We invite those of you with different play traditions and diverse contexts to share your experience with us, so that together we can better understand play in every child's learning, wellbeing and development. Our aim is a Statement that helps 'find' play and to share rather than limit it.

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ECA STATEMENT AT A GLANCE

A photograph of children playing in a sandpit. The children are wearing jackets and boots, and are focused on their play. The sand is a rich, golden-brown color. The image is partially obscured by a semi-transparent yellow box containing text.

EVERY CHILD HAS A UNIVERSAL RIGHT TO PLAY—PLAY IS ESSENTIAL & VALUABLE.

THE PRINCIPLES OF PLAY

1. Play is essential and valuable in its own right and for children’s learning and development: every child has a right to have play in their life.
2. Every child has a right to a balance of play experiences that develop a healthy mind and body and a sense of wellbeing.
3. Play builds each child’s capacity for communication and develops language and thinking skills.
4. Through play, children develop a sense of self and the emotional and social competence to participate in relationships.
5. Play connects children to their world, their cultural identities, to others and to other ways of knowing, doing and being.
6. Children’s right to play is our collective responsibility: all adults have a role in understanding, protecting and valuing the importance of play for every child, in every community.



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MORE THAN 60,000 YEARS OF PLAY ON COUNTRY

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities have been nurturing their children to love, learn, play and thrive on this continent for more than 60,000 years. We recognise the unique gifts that Indigenous ways of knowing offer Australia and the invitation expressed in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* to participate together in creating a better future for all our children (Referendum Council, 2017).

ECA acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures, and to the Elders both past and present.

WHO IS THIS STATEMENT FOR?

All children have a right to play. Children are competent, capable learners who play at all ages and places and in all circumstances, regardless of ability, social or cultural groups, or community settings. Yet, play and its significance for the whole child are not universally understood.

This Statement considers play and young children aged from birth to eight years. The right to play, however, extends to every child of any age, ability or background and is relevant in schools and other learning environments, services, and communities in which children participate. In this document, we want to highlight the crucial role and

expertise of early childhood educators and teachers in supporting young children's play and promoting awareness of its impacts for the whole child. We also set out some principles that early childhood educators and teachers can follow to uphold children's right to play.

This Statement will support educators and teachers to embed in daily practice some skills, tools and expertise that allow play to flourish, and share their understanding of play with families, communities and decision-makers. The Statement and principles have much to offer other settings and services with an interest in promoting the right of every child to play—they contain transferable concepts that can be taken up in ways that honour the children with whom they work and the context in which they operate.

ECA recognise that many adults and entities across the community—through their work and in their homes, venues and services—have a role in creating opportunities for play and removing obstacles to play. We also acknowledge that children's right to play is not always met—access to play can be negatively impacted by disadvantage, exclusion and other environmental factors. We all have a stake in the protection, preservation and promotion of play and play-based learning for children's wellbeing, learning and development.

WHY A STATEMENT ON PLAY?

Play is at the centre of every child's life. It is recognised as a right by Article 31 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), and is essential to children's learning,

development and wellbeing. As a signatory, Australia acknowledges children's right to rest and leisure as well as to engage in play and recreational activities that are age appropriate. Australia also undertakes to respect and promote these rights and to ensure that each child can participate freely in cultural life and the arts (Articles 31.1 and 31.2).

The UN (2013) identifies play as 'a vital dimension of childhood itself, fundamental to the joy, fun and sheer pleasure of growing up'. It also emphasises that effective implementation of play contributes to 'children's development, not only as individuals, but also as competent members of society' (UNCRC General Comment No 17, 2013). The right to play, it says, should not depend on the individual circumstances of a child, but be available to all (UNCRC General Comment 17, GC No 17, 2013).

There is an important intersection for children with a disability that is articulated in Article 30 of the UN *Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities* (2006), which states that 'children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play, recreation and leisure and sporting activities, including those activities in the school system'.

ECA's Code of Ethics commits early childhood educators and teachers to 'understand and be able to explain to others how play and leisure enhance children's learning, development and wellbeing' and to 'create and maintain safe, healthy, inclusive environments that support children's agency and enhance their learning' (ECA, 2016).

This Statement does not specify a single theory of play but can support educators in reflecting on existing strategies, considering new approaches to strengthen their practice, and recognising steps to protect, preserve and promote the distinctive elements of play in every child's life and in early childhood curricula.

This Statement can guide governments around Australia as they commit to incorporating early childhood strategies in formal education. The *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (DESE, 2019) re-commits all state and territory governments to strengthening early childhood education and supporting 'young children to learn and develop through play-based learning'. Incorporating early learning into formal education systems is a global movement that has great potential and some risk (UNICEF, 2018). The Statement can also support the early childhood profession in advocating for a better understanding and protection of every child's play in formal education systems, and in partnering with families to increase understanding of their child's play.

We want this Statement to encourage deeper understanding and cooperation between families, policymakers, planners and early childhood professionals, so that play experiences are available to all children across Australia—everywhere they live, learn and participate in the community.



WHAT IS PLAY?

At its heart, play is a universal and essential aspect of childhood. All children in every culture and setting play as a way of interacting with and learning about their world, and understanding who they are in relation to others.

Play evolves throughout childhood. It varies from child to child and across different physical, digital, cultural and social contexts—the type of play, where it occurs and its importance may vary widely. Sometimes play is described as ‘the work of childhood’, or as being to childhood what oxygen is to life. No single theory, definition or cultural perspective is sufficient to capture the richness of play.

Play comes in many forms. It can be an independent or social activity, self-initiated or sparked by others, uninterrupted or interactive, free-form or augmented in some way. Play may be indoor, outdoor, nature-based and messy or involve rule-making, props and equipment. Play contains differing degrees of imaginative, emotional, cognitive and physical activity—from baby’s first ‘peek-a-boo’ interactions through to an older child climbing a tree, engaging in dress-ups or creating a structure. While ideas about play often emphasise fun, play can encompass risk, challenge, problem-solving, self-awareness and conflict resolution.

Play is essential in its own right and for a child’s healthy growth and development. Through the processes of play, physical and physiological changes occur in the body that support all aspects of a child’s development. Whatever form it takes, play can usually be recognised by these features: it has an element of being freely chosen, is internally motivated and is structured by the child or the children involved. For more on definitions and theories of play see the ECA play resources page: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eca-statement-on-play.

A useful way of understanding play is that it is both a process and a context for learning; an experience or activity freely engaged in, where the child makes decisions, learns from their experiences, solves difficulties, and may have fun and take risks.

Find more information on different play pedagogies and a glossary of terms visit the ECA play resources page:
www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eca-statement-on-play

THE PEDAGOGY OF PLAY

When early childhood educators and teachers use their professional knowledge to make decisions about children's play, they are making pedagogical choices. 'A hallmark of being an early childhood educator is the capacity to make informed decisions that are in the best interests of young children' (ECA, 2018, p. 20).

Educational practice is informed by a wide body of research on play, neuroscience and physical development that underlines the significance of play for children now and in their future. Children's play is complex, layered, multi-modal. While various taxonomies and systems attempt to categorise play, it transcends and overlaps such categories.

Some early childhood professionals believe that to play is always to learn, others feel that play can be turned into learning or its value can be enhanced and extended by the efforts of the educator. A skilled, responsive and intentional educator with a theoretical framework for understanding play—whatever that theoretical lens may be—is best placed to influence, promote and protect play in the life of every child.

Early childhood educators and teachers bring a suite of professional tools to the pedagogy of play. Chief among these are intentionality, relationality, reflective practice, observation and documentation, and an understanding of how the environments they create, the policies that govern their settings, their own presence—passive or active—can enhance, disrupt, direct or otherwise shape children's play experiences. Find more on these ideas on ECA's play resources page: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eca-statement-on-play and at www.acecqa.gov.au.

ECA acknowledges that early childhood educators, teachers, leaders, researchers and theorists bring their own informed understanding, theories, expertise and experiences to play pedagogy. Rather than hone in on a single definition or approach to play, we want to encourage conscious choices and sound pedagogical practices.





**EVERY
CHILD
HAS A
UNIVERSAL
RIGHT TO
PLAY—PLAY
IS ESSENTIAL
& VALUABLE.**

EARLY CHILDHOOD AUSTRALIA







THE PRINCIPLES OF PLAY



ECA has identified six principles to promote and protect play. They will deepen understanding and increase support for every child's experiences of play.

01

Play is essential and valuable in its own right and for children's learning and development: every child has a right to have play in their life.

02

Every child has a right to a balance of play experiences that develop a healthy mind and body and a sense of wellbeing.

03

Play builds each child's capacity for communication and develops language and thinking skills.

04

Through play, children develop a sense of self and the emotional and social competence to participate in relationships.

05

Play connects children to their world, their cultural identities, to others and to other ways of knowing, doing and being.

06

Children's right to play is our collective responsibility: all adults have a role in understanding, protecting and valuing the importance of play for every child, in every community.

The following section expands on these principles and their implications across different environments. Also included here are links to strategies, expertise, research and resources on children's play to extend skills (for educators and teachers) or extend understanding of play and children (for families and communities).



●●● PRINCIPLE ONE



Play is essential and valuable in its own right and for children's learning and development: every child has a right to have play in their life.



PRINCIPLE ONE

Play is essential and valuable in its own right and for children's learning and development: every child has a right to have play in their life.

Play is innate to being human as well as socially constructed. All children play, yet individual play experiences and capacities are shaped by each child's immediate environment, the value placed on play, the relative resourcing and understanding of play within their family and immediate community, as well as their access to a quality learning environment.

In order to thrive, learn and grow, children need open-ended play—time and opportunity for play that is freely chosen and self-directed—throughout their day. They also need an evolving array of rich, varied play opportunities throughout

childhood, along with support from adults in their lives who value play and seek to learn about and foster play in ways that enable children to enjoy life and develop their potential. This means the adults examine obstacles and limitations that disproportionately prevent some children from fully experiencing play alongside their peers. For more ideas on rich play see the glossary of terms at www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eca-statement-on-play.

Acknowledging children's right to play and valuing play for its own sake gives early childhood educators, teachers

and learning settings a particular responsibility to protect and promote play. Learning Outcomes 2 and 3 of the updated Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF V2.0) require educators and teachers to ensure that play connects and enables children to contribute to their world and experience a strong sense of wellbeing (AGDE, 2022). Early childhood professionals are not alone in this responsibility, however. Supporting children's human right to play and removing obstacles to play are also the responsibilities that all adults have towards all children.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

- Every child has access to an evolving array of interesting and varied open-ended play across each day and throughout their early years, both at home and in learning settings.
- Educators and educational leaders examine the presumptions and biases that underpin play contexts and that prevent play. They ensure that all children have access to play and time to play. They strike a balance between children's safety and agency and balance risk with developmental benefit and enjoyment when creating environments for play. They bring intentionality and choose when to enter or not enter play. They source equipment and apply pedagogical approaches that respond to the unique needs and potential of every child in the learning setting.

WHAT STEPS CAN WE TAKE?

IN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS & TEACHERS CAN:

- develop a philosophy or 'pedagogy of play' as an intentional part of their professional practice, recognising the benefits of play for children every day
- become 'play ambassadors' who engage families and communities in understanding the value and importance of play for children
- protect play as valid and essential within learning environments, for instance, by sharing play pedagogy, promoting play policies and demonstrating the value of play experiences
- look for opportunities to link children's play to home and resource family capacity using documentation, for example, to make children's play visible to their families.

DIRECTORS, LEADERS, PRINCIPALS & MANAGERS CAN:

- ensure that spaces and times for play are sufficiently resourced and protected within the learning program and curriculum
- embed play policies and create professional learning opportunities that centre on play in educational practice
- communicate with families and caregivers about every child's fundamental right to play, its meaning in children's learning and development and why play is central to an early childhood curriculum
- implement strategies, resources and modifications that respond to differing capacities and needs so each child can participate in play
- gather the evidence on play by sponsoring, supporting or engaging in play research on the benefits, outcomes and impact of play pedagogies
- make links between the play principles in this document and the philosophy of the learning setting.

AT HOME

FAMILIES & CAREGIVERS CAN:

- learn more about the different kinds of play and how these support children's developing brains and their physical, cognitive and social capacities
- offer a variety of play opportunities and time to play each day—this might include imaginary games, making things from everyday materials or indoor and outdoor play
- take opportunities to be playful with your child through humour, imagination and joining in games with your child
- stand up for children's right to play in learning environments and community spaces.



IN THE COMMUNITY

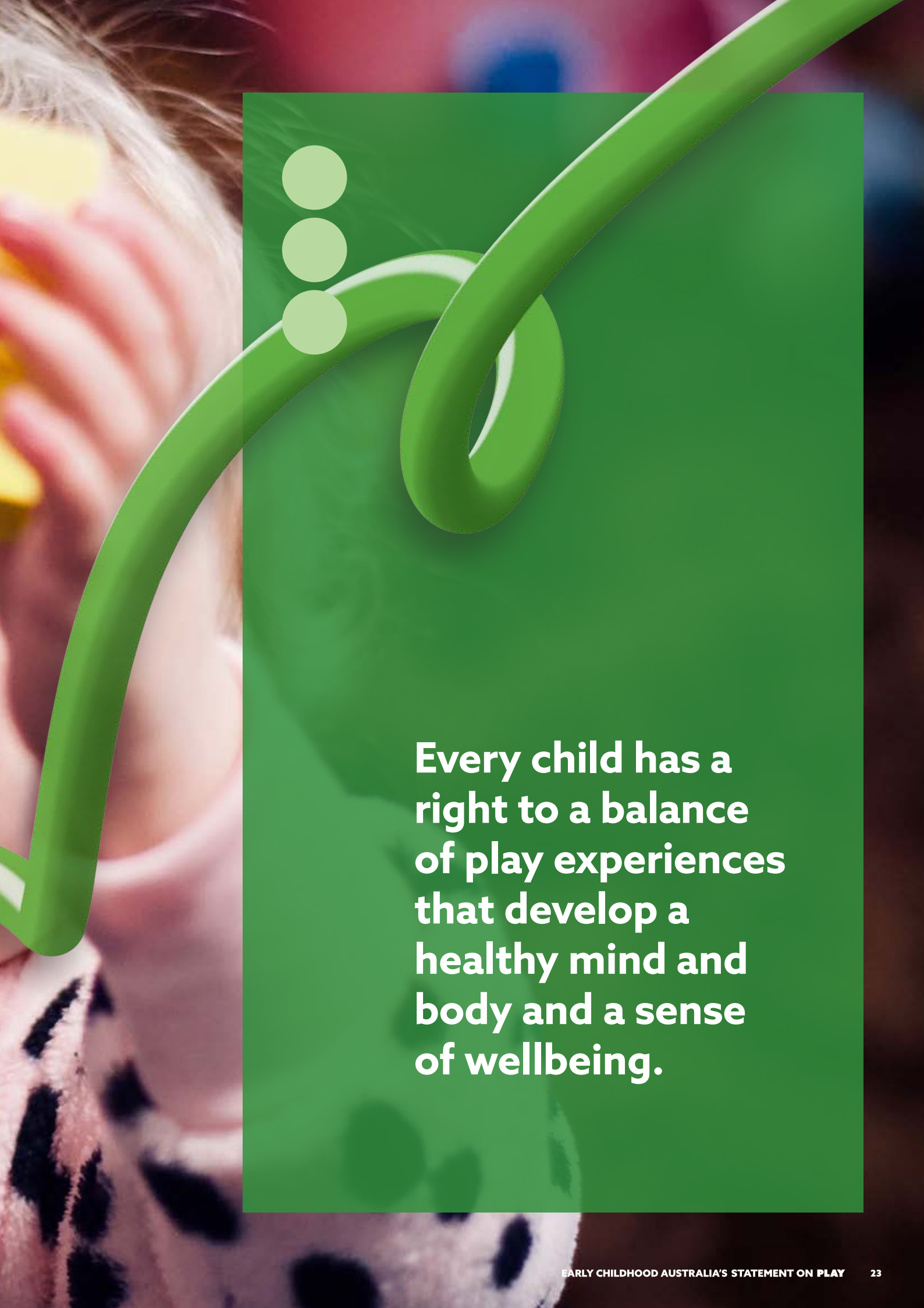
- Local and state governments can ensure that services, built environments and community facilities preserve and maintain play spaces, natural settings, diverse play equipment and opportunities for children of all ages and abilities.
- State and federal governments and decision-makers can sponsor research on play and ensure that formal learning and regulatory environments enshrine and protect every child's right to play.
- Community organisations, businesses and services can uphold children's right to play by incorporating nurturing play spaces into the services and venues they offer to children, or where children participate as part of families, schools or learning services.
- All governments can honour and uphold children's right to play in all social policy—particularly those that impact children (health, education, child protection, family violence, housing and homelessness).
- Individuals can respect children's right to play and participate in community events. They can examine where they uphold these rights in their own community and can advocate for children to have access to safe, quality play as part of community decisions and initiatives.







●●● PRINCIPLE
TWO



Every child has a right to a balance of play experiences that develop a healthy mind and body and a sense of wellbeing.



PRINCIPLE TWO

Every child has a right to a balance of play experiences that develop a healthy mind and body and a sense of wellbeing.

To develop a healthy mind and body and a strong sense of overall wellbeing, every child needs a mix of play interactions—including physical play—across the day, starting from their earliest months and continuing throughout childhood.

Conclusive neuroscientific evidence shows the close relationship between the developing structure of the brain, the strength of neural pathways and physical, cognitive and social play interactions from the earliest ages*.

Play builds gross and fine motor skills, muscles, agility and strength as well as resilience and confidence. Adapted playground and other equipment combined with thoughtful, responsive programming can enable children of differing abilities to participate in and experience the physical, mental and wellbeing impacts of play. *The Global Action Plan on*

Physical Activity 2018–2030 (WHO, 2018) stresses the multiple benefits of active play for all children from early childhood onwards and latest guidelines set the standards for—among other things—healthy physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep in early childhood settings (WHO, 2021).

A child's overall wellbeing depends on engaging in a rich, diverse range of play that includes vigorous physical play and activities that incorporate elements of risk-taking, such as risky play. EYLF V2.0 Learning Outcomes 2 and 3 are supported by physical engagement with the world through play. A mix of play activities can enable children to build resilience, learn to regulate their emotions, develop agency and autonomy, as well as build skills in managing and responding to risk and uncertainty.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

- Babies develop muscle control, awareness of body position and movement through floor time and gentle playful interactions with adult caregivers, while toddlers benefit from at least three hours of physical activity each day according to the *Australian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for the Early Years* (Australian Government Department of Health, 2017).
- Running, climbing, skipping, riding and play-based experiences such as obstacle courses help children build strong bones and muscles, improve balance, movement, coordination and overall physical health.
- 'Loose parts' play and using tools and equipment in the daily outdoor program as well as opportunities for children to engage with nature and natural play spaces.
- Games that include gross motor, agility and physical literacy skills, such as throwing and kicking are playful ways to integrate physical activity. Games can also be a good way to combine physical activity and cultural engagement, through resources such as *Yulunga Traditional Indigenous Games* (ASC, 2008).

WHAT STEPS CAN WE TAKE?

IN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS & TEACHERS CAN:

- audit existing skill sets and resources and connect with specialist play pedagogues to strengthen educator skills and resources in new and different play approaches; for example, nature and bush play, indoor/outdoor programs, or resourcing children's dramatic play
- research how play and adult engagement in children's play can support the development of children's confidence, resilience and wellbeing
- provide time and use language that supports children to problem-solve through their play and manage risk without adult intervention.



DIRECTORS, LEADERS, PRINCIPALS & MANAGERS CAN:

- ensure that the curriculum and programming offer a balance of diverse play experiences
- audit time allocated for children to engage in vigorous, active play each day or across the week and compare where possible with the national recommendations such as *Australia's 24-Hour Movement Guidelines*
- use the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) domains and other data to understand demographic needs and play that may not be available for some children; for example, children without access to safe outdoor play spaces.

AT HOME

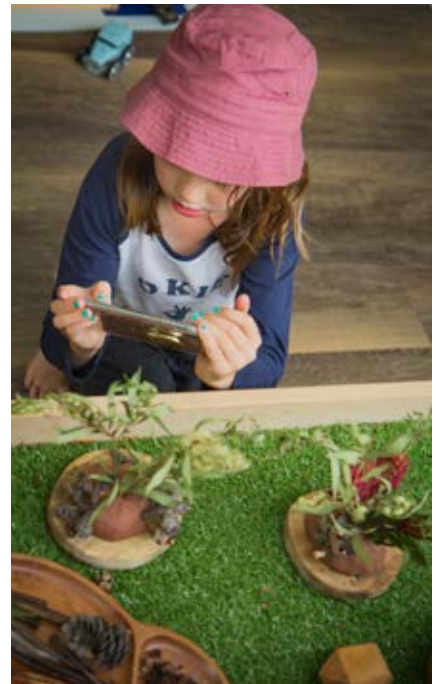
FAMILIES & CAREGIVERS CAN:

- seek out activities, information and everyday resources to support a balanced range of play experiences for different abilities and ages
- pool resources and share ideas with other families
- participate in community groups such as local playgroups, cultural playgroups, music and outdoor programs, library, toy library and mobile library facilities.

IN THE COMMUNITY

- Local and state governments can develop and protect children’s access to venues that offer natural and built play environments as well as a mix of physically active, indoor–outdoor and nature play experiences.
- State and federal governments can ensure that regulatory requirements and resourcing for children’s learning environments prioritise a mix of play experiences and ensure safety for all ages and abilities.
- Museums and institutions that welcome children and families can offer a mix of age-appropriate play experiences and interactions with content.
- Individuals can offer to coordinate local playgroups.

*Excellent explanations, examples and resources on the developing brain and the neuroscience of play can be found on websites of the Center on the Developing Child by Harvard University, the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) and Raising Children Network. Be You resources point to the links between play, challenge and children’s mental wellbeing and you can find more on inclusive play and risky play concepts on the ECA play resources page: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eca-statement-on-play.

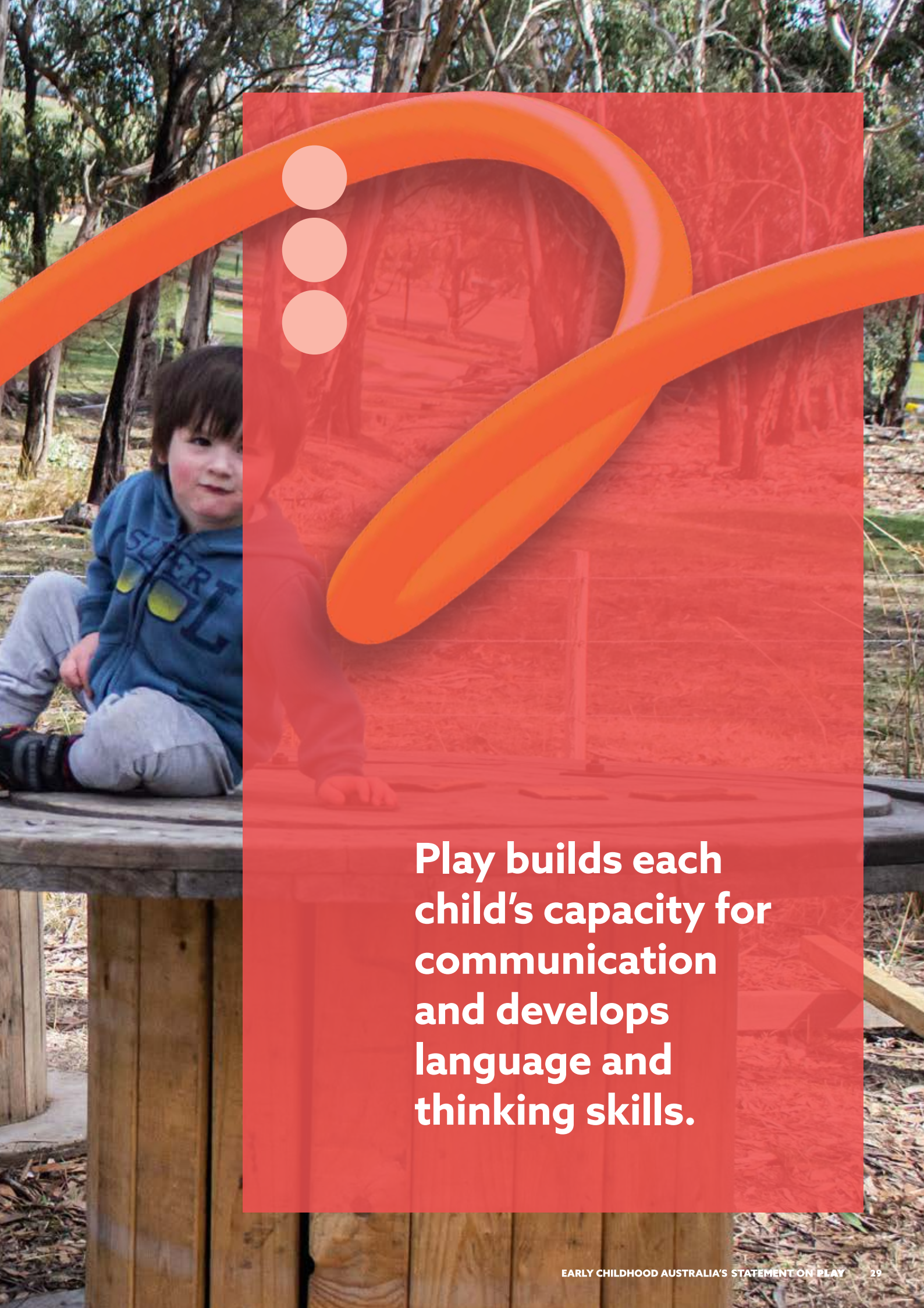






● ● ●
**PRINCIPLE
THREE**





Play builds each child's capacity for communication and develops language and thinking skills.



PRINCIPLE THREE

Play builds each child's capacity for communication and develops language and thinking skills.

Children arrive into the world equipped to communicate with others in many forms even before language develops. Babies cry, imitate and make sounds. From their earliest months, they initiate and respond to playful interactions with adult carers and others. Children play in many languages, alone and with others—even where they do not share a language—using signs, symbols, gestures, images and formal communication systems such as Auslan and adaptive technologies. As their effective communication skills evolve through play (EYLF V2.0 Learning Outcome 5), children learn the skills of listening, understanding and articulating clearly. They also develop the capacity to tell stories and take part in creating and enacting scenarios, for instance, in imaginative play.

When children's experiences exceed the language they have to describe them, play is a way for the child to process complex understandings of their world. This can apply to strong positive experiences such as celebrations, cultural practices and large events as well as exposure to social problems and natural events such as homelessness, relationship violence, bushfires, drought or pandemics.

Play develops children's cognitive skills and builds scientific thinking and reasoning. Through play, children are able to

explore concepts and apply labels for experiences and phenomena. They can practise problem-solving, develop and apply strategies, use tools and materials, discover sensations and outcomes, sustain engagement with ideas and learn to distinguish when to persevere and when to seek assistance. Imaginative play is an important process through which children develop their capacity for abstract thinking and questioning. These thinking skills continue to grow as children acquire and demonstrate general knowledge through play and are particularly strengthened when play allows children to engage in sustained shared thinking with peers or adults (Sylva et al., 2004).

Play provides a context to experiment with ideas—such as understanding animal noises, investigating trees or participating in games and routines—and provides opportunities for children to share their growing knowledge. Play enables children to be immersed in complex experiences in a state of 'relaxed alertness' while actively processing events and concepts—some of the conditions that support learning and thinking (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2009).

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

- Children at all ages develop understandings of mathematical and other abstract concepts, language, literacy and numeracy through play-based experiences where they label, measure, describe and share as well as create stories, draw and more.
- Children have ample opportunities to use natural elements in play such as sand, water, leaves, other materials and equipment to explore abstract and physical concepts. They build structures, for instance an experimental volcano or a water garden.
- Children build language and cognitive skills when they engage in sustained shared thinking with peers and adults, observing and recording reactions, processes and sensations and sharing knowledge.



WHAT STEPS CAN WE TAKE?

IN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS & TEACHERS CAN:

- weave literacy, vocabulary and mathematical concepts into everyday activities, materials, play provocations and environments, for instance offering a well-stocked 'writing centre' or collaborative story-making for children to develop and enjoy communication skills
- support children's expression of complex ideas or difficult experiences in play; identify when referral for specialist support or resources may be needed

DIRECTORS, LEADERS, PRINCIPALS & MANAGERS CAN:

- create and protect environments that value play and whole-child approaches to curriculum areas
- foster a wide variety of communication and language sharing in the learning community—using home languages, Auslan, diverse scripts, signage and other visual media in the learning environment
- ensure a supply of materials—books, audio-recordings, writing and measuring equipment—to foster play with numbers, words and experimentation with different communication techniques.

AT HOME

FAMILIES & CAREGIVERS CAN:

- share your own play traditions with your child or translate games and songs from their early learning setting using home or first languages
- resource children's imaginative play with space, time and everyday items, clothing and props
- delight in your child's abstract thinking, creative ideas and problem-solving
- get involved with your child's curiosity about the immediate environment; use readily available materials—pegs, baskets, plastic cups, cushions—and engage with existing phenomena.

IN THE COMMUNITY

- Governments, businesses and other organisations can create spaces for children's play to leave its mark by finding ways for children to express ideas and for children's play to influence the community, its shared spaces and environments.







A child with long brown hair, wearing a purple long-sleeved shirt and patterned leggings, is sitting on a green lawn. They are playing with colorful blocks (yellow, red, blue, green) that form a long, winding path. In the background, there are wooden blocks and a large potted plant. A large, white, stylized graphic of a continuous loop is overlaid on the image, framing the child and the play area.

●●● PRINCIPLE FOUR



**Through play,
children develop
a sense of self and
the emotional and
social competence
to participate in
relationships.**



PRINCIPLE FOUR

Through play, children develop a sense of self and the emotional and social competence to participate in relationships.

Play provides children the opportunity to enjoy friendships and develop social–emotional skills. It helps them build confidence, social competence and self-regulation skills. Through play, children gain an understanding of their own and others’ actions and insight into social situations. Play often involves older or younger siblings, cousins and other relationships across different ages. Play also offers the chance to learn throughout childhood how to adapt to change, to engage with peers and explore their preference for both collaboration and independence. Children become confident and involved learners and develop a strong sense of identity

(EYLF V2.0 Learning Outcomes 1 and 4) through play.

Play strengthens the child’s capacity to identify, express and rethink emotions through increasingly complex dialogue and storylines. Especially through dramatic play and extended role play, children develop an understanding of different social situations and cultural and societal roles. In their play, children are able to revisit scenarios to try out different outcomes.

Intentional early childhood practice ensures that the play pedagogy, setting, materials and equipment, adult interventions and educator-initiated

learning experiences combine to support and extend the child’s emerging sense of self and provide culturally safe environments that affirm their unique context and respond to children’s communication and sensory needs.

Early childhood professionals have the expertise to ensure that the interests of the child are at the heart of the environments and experiences they create, through which children can explore identity, power, bias, gender and culture. Children’s imaginative play is a safe and powerful way for them to experiment with roles, behaviours and communication styles.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

- Children have opportunities to join a group, share loose parts, use materials such as blocks or sand and take turns on a ride to build self-knowledge and confidence, explore ways of interacting, and evolve understanding of their own and others’ perspectives.
- Puppets, posting boxes and sheer curtains allow babies and younger children to play peek-a-boo, interact with each other and with educators while imitating everyday processes.
- For older children, well-stocked dress-up boxes and everyday props, theatre and construction materials, and garden and home corners spark dramatic play or motivate building projects.
- Children are given opportunities to choose what and how they play and negotiate their own rules with peers.

Learn more about one approach to intentional teaching, imaginative play and meaning-making in the Conceptual PlayWorld (www.monash.edu/conceptual-playworld).

Resources and links relevant to play and emotional self-regulation, including a glossary of different types of play, can be found on ECA’s play resources page www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eca-statement-on-play. Further links to resources for including children of all abilities, insights into role play, dramatic play, culture and play—such as *The Aboriginal Early Childhood Practice Guide* (Staines & Scarlet, 2018) and *The Anti-Bias Approach in Early Childhood* (Scarlet, 2016)—are also available on the page.

WHAT STEPS CAN WE TAKE?

IN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS & TEACHERS CAN:

- provide irresistible provocations and ensure that dress-up boxes, other diverse equipment and everyday props such as puppets and construction materials are available to offer opportunities for role play, dramatic and social play
- reflect individually and with their team to deepen their understanding and seek out culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate play resources that encourage children to explore and express their identity, family and community context
- support children in their own conflict resolution and problem-solving during play rather than intervene immediately
- use playful everyday interactions, role play and moments of silliness to spark imagination, humour and joy
- work with families and caregivers to incorporate equipment and play materials into the learning environment that reflect the child's context, abilities and interests.

DIRECTORS, LEADERS, PRINCIPALS & MANAGERS CAN:

- consider child-development data from the AEDC to respond to local community priorities
- actively network with local community groups, inclusion and other services to participate in and learn about children's play contexts
- invest in ongoing professional learning to understand children and families and to resource educators' capacity to be intentional in their play-based approaches to learning
- stock equipment, books or materials that explore and reflect culture and social identity and offer children options for complex play experiences and interactions.

AT HOME

FAMILIES & CAREGIVERS CAN:

- join your child in pretend or imaginative play, find your 'inner child' and use your imagination to build connections with the child
- follow your child's lead to learn more about them and their play interests—it may look like messing around, but it helps your child think symbolically and develop critical thinking skills
- share information on cultural practices, festivities and celebrations with other families and the learning setting.

IN THE COMMUNITY

- During celebrations, milestones and community events, governments, businesses, museums and venues can make space for children's participation and playful interactions with peers and other members of the community.
- In the play opportunities that businesses and community organisations offer children, they can take steps to include a diverse range of resources and experiences that move beyond stereotypical and gendered play resources.







● ● ● **PRINCIPLE**
FIVE



Play connects children to their world, their cultural identities, to others and to other ways of knowing, doing and being.



PRINCIPLE FIVE

Play connects children to their world, their cultural identities, to others and to other ways of knowing, doing and being.

Play enables children to make meaning of their world. It is a context and a process: it takes place in spaces or environments and is a unique way of learning for children and for gathering information about the world. Through play, children demonstrate their interest in and understanding of the world, share growing knowledge, imagine scenarios and build scientific thinking and reasoning (Do kangaroos make a noise? Why does it rain? Where does the moon go during the day?)

Play is a platform for children to experiment, try out and try again.

There are cultural differences related to children's freedom to explore and experience the world—for example, Aboriginal communities offer children every opportunity to explore the world around them, to help them develop the necessary skills to successfully negotiate their pathways to adulthood (Lohoar et al., 2014).

Families and educators may not share the same understanding of play which can open a vital channel for exploring identity and different ways of knowing, doing and being. Some families—for many valid reasons (cultural or social

contexts, childhood experiences, war, trauma, poverty or dislocation)—may not view their child's play as important or an activity to foster or be involved in. Conversely, families may be aware of and appreciate many forms of children's play that are not visible to early childhood educators. Educators can take the opportunity to learn more about each child and their context, exchange knowledge with families and find ways to better understand and recognise forms of play that are part of life, identity and culture for many children.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

- The setting welcomes, mirrors and celebrates the qualities and unique differences of its members—the children, educators and families who make up the community.
- The environments, play materials, books, resources and provocations are meaningful to and connect the children to their culture, their sense of identity and to the immediate community and natural world around them.
- Provocations, interactions and excursions both within the setting and with neighbouring individuals, local businesses and organisations give children of different ages and abilities the chance to gather knowledge of and participate in their community.

WHAT STEPS CAN WE TAKE?

IN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS & TEACHERS CAN:

- recognise, celebrate and support every child's play as a process and context for learning and development
- support children to participate in play through play environments, props, equipment and themes relevant to the child's own culture and interests
- support children's connection with other ways of knowing, doing and being by exploring local natural or social phenomena. Depending on location this could include learning on Country, following the regeneration of waterways or bushland after natural events, a trip to a bakery, factory, solar farm, dairy or potter's studio to investigate how things are made
- work with families to extend open-ended play opportunities between the early learning setting and the home environment and to spark children's interest in their local context
- learn more about play at home and invite children and families to share their play traditions.

DIRECTORS, LEADERS, PRINCIPALS & MANAGERS CAN:

- incorporate different traditions and practices of play into the programming and curriculum through authentic engagement with local contexts and cultures
- look for opportunities to connect educators and family perspectives on play to increase insights and shared understanding
- where possible, host Elders, community organisations and cultural groups—dance, music, theatre—to enable children to experience other ways of being and to feel strong and proud in their culture.

AT HOME

FAMILIES & CAREGIVERS CAN:

- observe and playfully explore together with babies and toddlers, follow their focus, listen for reactions and questions, share language to help them identify sensations and observations
- consider sharing cultural perspectives, games and play traditions with your child’s educator and learning setting.

IN THE COMMUNITY

- All levels of government can create opportunities, events and experiences that connect children at every level of ability with their world.

Explore more information about sensory, social, emotional and independent play through different theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Montessori, Parten, Froebel, Erikson, Malaguzzi and Steiner on the ECA play resources page: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eca-statement-on-play. Also consider reading practitioner handbooks that synthesise different approaches and contexts for play—including *Play In Early Childhood Education*: (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2016) or *Learning Through Play* (Robinson et al., 2018).









● ● ● PRINCIPLE
SIX



Children's right to play is our collective responsibility: all adults have a role in understanding, protecting and valuing the importance of play for every child, in every community.



PRINCIPLE SIX

Children's right to play is our collective responsibility: all adults have a role in understanding, protecting and valuing the importance of play for every child, in every community.

All adults can support each child's right to play by putting children's interests first and ensuring they are part of enabling play for children everywhere in Australia, rather than obstructing quality play opportunities or reducing time for play.

This requires adults to understand and respect the meaning of play for the child and the child's context. It also requires them to consider how existing and new environments where children live, learn and participate in the community can provide for children's differing capabilities to play.

A simple way adults can foster imaginative play is by encouraging times for exploration and play that are 'toy free'. Adult-designed games, activities and purchased toys are not essential for play and simple everyday items can open up a world of imaginative interactions.

While adults often provide the environment and conditions for play, it is the child who owns the play. Adults can ensure that in unstructured play, children remain the decision-makers on what and how they play. Depending on the diverse abilities of each child, or their

family, to engage in play, adult support can take many different forms from encouraging, coaching and co-playing in order to establish play skills through to refraining from active intervention at all. Adult intervention needs to be sensitive, reflective and minimal, based on the child's context, or aimed at avoiding harm. Children, families and communities thrive when everyone values and makes play a priority for all children.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

- Children are welcomed and valued for their play rather than their 'readiness' to comply with adult systems and structures.
- Environments are structured around children's play, learning and development needs, interests and abilities.
- Children's play interactions are understood and respected by families and other adults who are equipped to respond to children's play initiatives.
- Strong connections exist between children's play in the early learning settings, at home and in the community.
- Play opportunities in the early learning setting connect children with others in their community.
- Every child can engage in the opportunities for play available in the setting.

WHAT STEPS CAN WE TAKE?

Adults can help to ensure that children's play is fun, safe, fair and includes everyone who wants to participate. All adults have a role to play in this.

IN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS & TEACHERS CAN:

- take a key role in supporting continuity of play across home and early learning settings and the wider community
- partner with individuals and organisations to create play spaces and opportunities that respond to the needs of all children
- advocate for play that enables safe participation and prioritises children's agency
- reflect on and address their own and others' in-built assumptions and biases.

DIRECTORS, LEADERS, PRINCIPALS & MANAGERS CAN:

- build children’s educational programs around play and lead the understanding of play’s role in the whole child’s wellbeing and learning
- embed play pedagogies, policies and educator professional learning
- ensure there are opportunities for each child, at every age, every day, to have play experiences that meet their individual contexts and amplify their capacities—including indoor and outdoor spaces, time, curriculum and programming
- create nurturing environments to address limitations—whether social, cultural, gender-based, physical or cognitive—that otherwise inhibit children’s capacity to participate in play and reach their potential
- help families and caregivers understand the educational value of play.

AT HOME

FAMILIES & CAREGIVERS CAN:

- develop an understanding of the importance of play in your child’s life and show value for their play
- if you don’t understand play or feel confident about ways to encourage play, consider talking with or watching how an educator or another family goes about it
- be aware of your own impact on play; focus on the meaning of play for your child and on the child’s interests over adult interests
- insist on your child’s right to play and encourage other children’s play
- make time for your child to play and offer nurturing guidance and everyday resources
- ensure a mix of play and play contexts—including physically active and social play.

IN THE COMMUNITY

ALL GOVERNMENTS AND DECISION-MAKERS CAN:

- ensure that safe, well-resourced and age-appropriate play opportunities and resources are available to all children, regardless of location or family income
- consult with children and engage play specialists to audit each local community’s ‘play infrastructure’
- place opportunities for children’s play—including physical and nature play, creative play, social play—at the centre of infrastructure and community planning.



STATE AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENTS AND DECISION-MAKERS CAN:

- recognise the value of play in children's formal learning settings, including the design of curricula and school environments
- invest in strategies and resources for play-based mental health initiatives to support children exposed to trauma or natural disasters
- invest in accessible play spaces and affordable play experiences
- include early childhood educational perspectives in policies for children and embed play across curriculum approaches
- reward and recognise businesses, government and community groups when they acknowledge and incorporate play experiences for children into the services they provide for children or families.

BUSINESSES, COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS, PROFESSIONALS, MUSEUMS, VENUES AND OTHER PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS CAN:

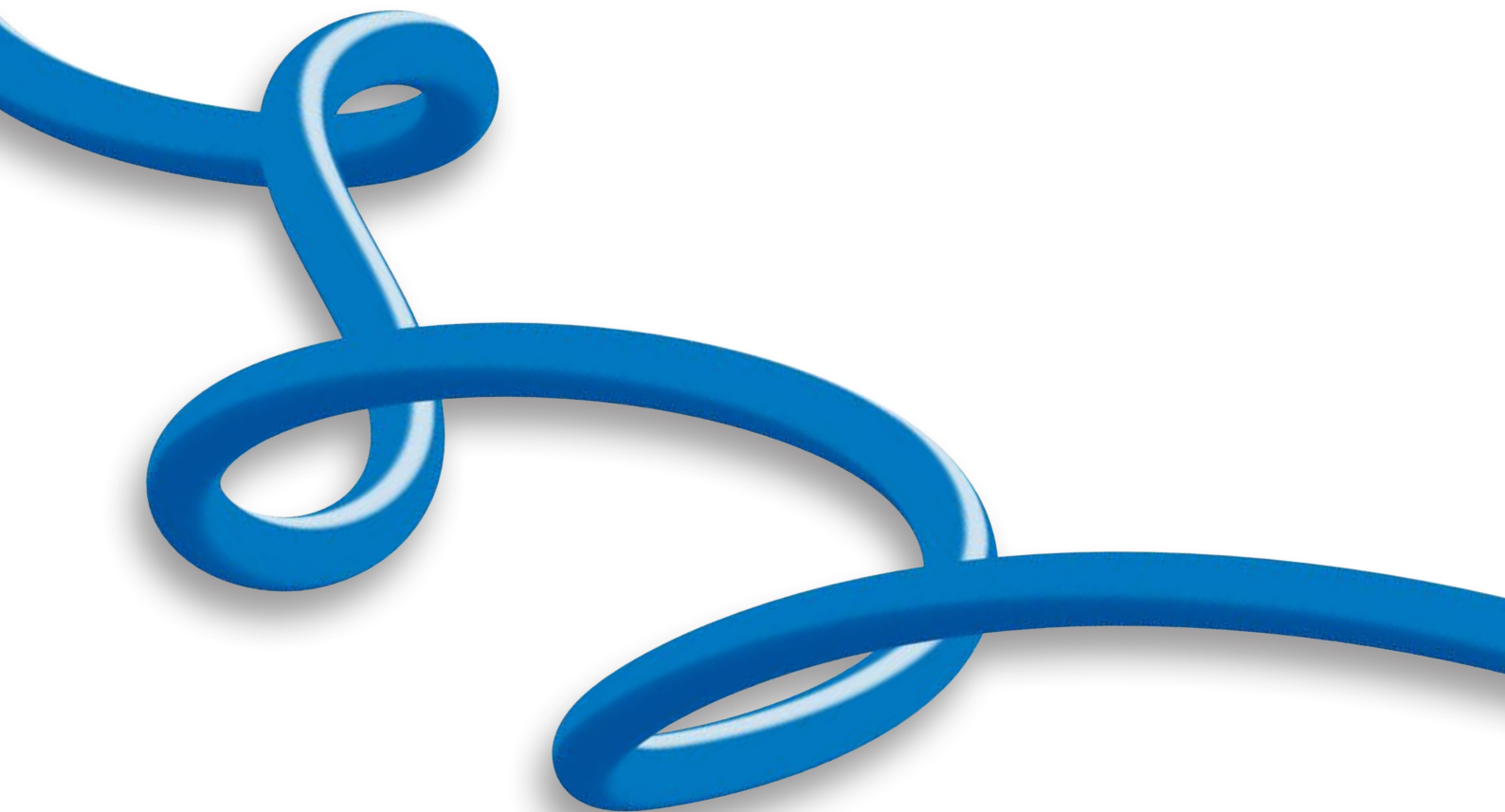
- incorporate play-friendly spaces and resources to support children's and families' participation as equals in their community.

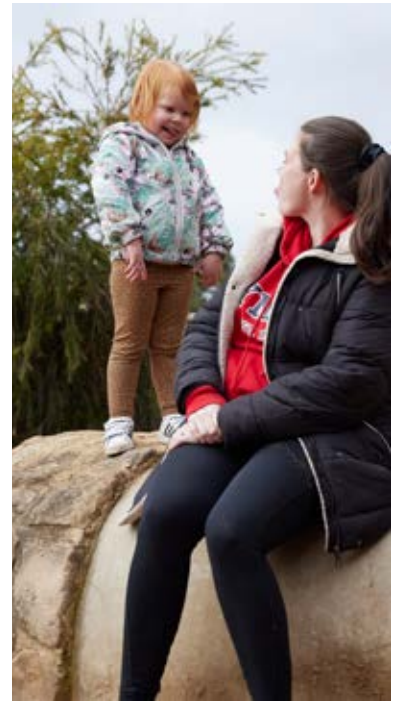
EMPLOYERS, UNIONS AND WORKPLACES CAN:

- encourage children's play in staff spaces and events, if safe or possible, and support staff in spending time with their children.

MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY CAN:

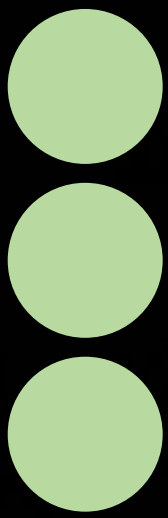
- advocate for the protection and creation of public places for play
- welcome children's playful presence at community events.











**FIND OUT
MORE
& WHERE
TO BEGIN**





FIND OUT MORE

ECA's aim is to build a community of people and organisations who value play and ensure that play is a priority for every young child—at home, in learning environments and in the community. To show your support, you can:

- visit our website for more information:
www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eca-statement-on-play
- participate in Early Learning Matters Week every year—find out how to get involved www.earlylearningmatters.org.au
- celebrate children's learning through play—share your favourite play strategy or play moment with us.

WHERE TO BEGIN

ENGAGE

Find resources and information to grow your knowledge and develop your practice in upholding children's right to play.

PROMOTE

Become a play ambassador and advocate for children's play in your setting, community or in government policy.

MAKE A CHANGE

Put children's right to play first in the decisions you make or where you have influence.



REFERENCES

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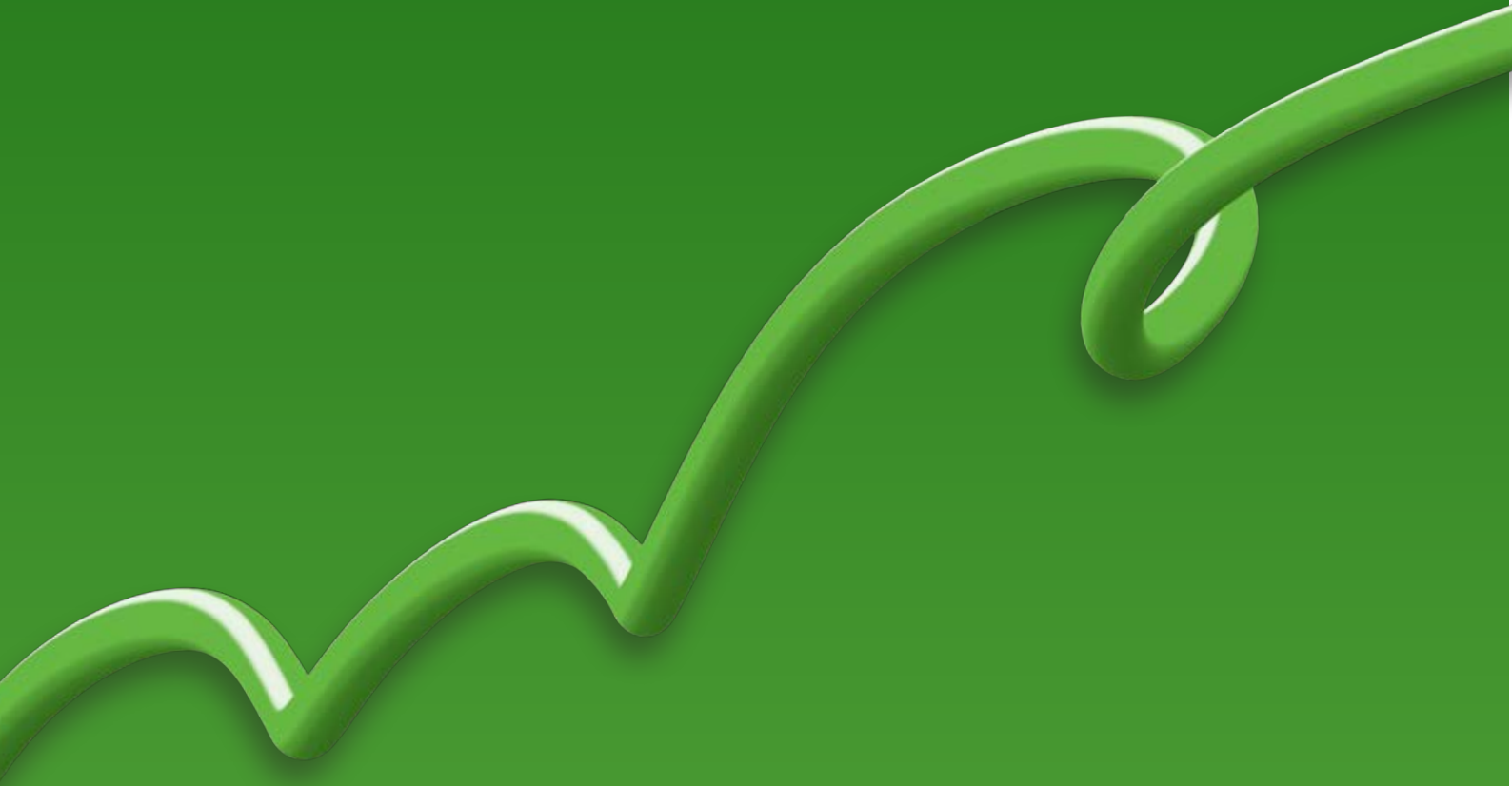
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