

reflections

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PLAY BASED LEARNING: WHERE DO EDUCATORS FIT?

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In early childhood education and care, the articulation of “why we do what we do” has become increasingly important as we journey through the implementation of the National Quality Framework. As educators become more confident in articulating the intentionality behind their work, there’s a chance that we may have forgotten to include one of the most fundamental facets of our programs – play. The articulation of play however is not a new debate; Mitchell and Maston in 1948 (p. 103) cite Kilpatrick as stating ‘in all educational discussion there is scarcely a word upon whose meaning there is so little general agreement.’ More contemporary early childhood thinkers agree, as Anne Kennedy (2015) suggests, ‘play is possibly the most accepted, promoted and yet, the most contentious issue in early childhood education’.

Play as a concept in itself can be difficult to define. Rather than providing an exact definition, play has more traditionally been characterised. Play is often “voluntary, pleasurable..., flexible, symbolic and meaningful for the players... [It is also] active (mentally and physically), intrinsically motivated... and process-oriented” (Kennedy, 2015). With such a broad range of characteristics, it becomes clear how difficult it can be to identify play-based learning. This is the first of many challenges that educators face in articulating their daily work.

The relationship between play and learning can be even more tenuous if we, as early childhood educators are not able to make it visible. Theorists have an important place in supporting educators to define this link. The likes of

PLAY BASED LEARNING: WHERE DO EDUCATORS FIT? (CONTINUED)

Froebel, McMillan, Isaacs, Piaget and Vygotsky can play a part in guiding our thoughts on what this might look like in our setting and how we can articulate our practice (Dockett and Fler, 1999). In addition to thinkers, there are various tools to assist us in defining what play looks like in an early childhood setting. Through documenting evidence about children's play and learning, educators can work towards making this learning visible for everyone involved.

Play-based learning supports the development of the whole child. Rather than direct-instruction pedagogy, play-based environments are best placed to understand that a child's social and emotional wellbeing is intrinsically linked to their academic success. Supporting the development of the 'whole child' is continually espoused in the approved learning frameworks, and is something that all educators are mandated to work towards (Department of Education and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2009). This uncovers a key part of the 'what is play-based learning?' debate; that of the role of the educator. Educators have a key role to play in supporting the development of the whole child, and understanding what this role may look like, may help deepen understanding of play-based learning even further.

This integrated approach can help educators to understand that at different times throughout the day, their role will look different. The children may be involved in guided play and learning, adult-led learning and child-directed play and learning. These three pedagogical strands of a play-based program can offer a point of reflection for us all as educators and a further insight into our understanding of play-based learning.

Consider what play looks like in your setting; as a team, do you have a shared understanding of this? In what ways do you make the links between play and learning visible to all stakeholders in your setting? Does your team have a shared understanding of the role of the educator in play? Is this reflected in service documents such as your philosophy?

Consider:

- What do you believe to be the characteristics of play?
- Do you have a shared understanding of the difference between free play and play-based learning? What is the difference?
- How do you articulate this to families and children?
- How can you support families to deepen their understanding of the importance of play in the learning process for children?
- As an educator team, do you have a shared understanding of the role the educator plays?

References:

- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). (2009). *The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework*. Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
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- Mitchell, E.D. and Maston, B.S. (1948). *The theory of play*. New York: Barnes and Co (taken from 'play and pedagogy in early childhood settings – book with purple cover).



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