



Getting started with play-based learning in early years

Transcription: Types of play

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Types of play

There is a lot of variety in children's play. Let's look at five main types. They are:

- Physical play
- Playing with objects
- Pretend play
- Symbolic play
- Games with rules

You'll notice, though, that the types often overlap in children's play. Each one is important for children's development. You, as an adult, have an important role in supporting and maximising this.

Physical Play

There are two types of physical play. The first type is gross motor play which involves the larger muscles of the arms, legs and torso, and includes running, jumping, riding a bike and climbing. Gross motor play maintains health, strength and stamina, and also helps children to develop coordination, balance, and rhythm. As adults, we sometimes misunderstand rough and tumble or risky physical play and try to stop it. However, done safely, all forms of gross motor play are beneficial and help to develop children's empathy, self-confidence and friendship skills.

You can support gross motor play by providing well organised outdoor or natural spaces.

The other type of physical play is fine motor play. This involves the smaller muscles of the hands, fingers and wrists. Fine motor play develops precise hand and finger movements needed for gripping and using tools and objects, the skills like drawing and writing. It also children to develop concentration and perseverance. You should support fine motor play by providing or pointing out varied opportunities to use smaller muscles.

Playing with objects

Children often choose to play with objects. They naturally sort, classify and order them, they craft and construct things out of them.

By sorting, classifying and ordering objects, children develop their mathematical thinking and language skills.

By doing craft activities, children learn about the properties of materials and developing their aesthetic appreciation. They also practise their fine motor skills.

By constructing with rigid or mouldable materials, like blocks and playdough, children plan, problem solve and evaluate.

Children naturally challenge themselves whilst playing with objects. Talking to themselves while they play helps to support their working memory and their thinking when they encounter difficulties.

Support children by providing them with a wide range of safe objects and materials. Use new vocabulary and think aloud during play. This kind of modelling helps develop language and problem-solving strategies.

Pretend play

Pretend play could be anything from a child playing alone and substituting a pretend object for a real one... to a complex and dramatic story involving role play and a larger group of children.

Pretend play extends children's imaginations and supports their language and narrative abilities, as well as their social skills and their emotional regulation.

You can support pretend play by providing a range of props and dressing up materials. These could be everyday items like empty boxes, old or damaged clothing or bits of fabric. It is important that props are simple and provide creative opportunities. If they are too specific and define particular roles or activities, they don't allow the same opportunities for children's imaginations. You can help to develop children's learning through pretend play by engaging as co-players and following their lead.

Symbolic play

Symbolic play includes communicating and representing ideas through language and sounds, as well as mark-making.

Play with words and language encourages children's language development. Playing with words and language, rather than correcting errors, has a more positive impact on children's language, confidence and abilities. You can support their development by playing rhyming games, accepting and using their made-up words and phrases, and sharing in their enjoyment of wordplay in jokes.

Drawing and other visual media are a rich source of children's exploration and meaning making. You can support children's learning by providing as wide a range of media as possible. Allow children to explore techniques like mixing paint colours, drawing with charcoal, and printing. Let children experiment and discover independently or model techniques to encourage them to engage.

Play with sounds, rhythm, music and dance supports children's cultural identity, their creative thinking and their experience of emotions. It lends itself well to playing collaboratively in groups and supports social skills and feelings of self-worth. Provide spaces and opportunities where children can move, make noise, and access music.

Games with rules

Children enjoy chasing and hiding or playing card games, board games or digital games. Whether a child is making up their own game, modifying the rules of an existing one, or playing by the established rules, they are learning!

Allowing children to develop their own games and their own rules has the most positive impact on their language and social skills. Young children have a keen sense of fairness and regard rules as important.

Negotiating rules in games supports their moral development and growth as citizens.

You can support children by providing materials and spaces for different types of games, and by teaching or modelling new ones.

Children are experts at play. Challenge them and give them the space and opportunities they need to learn through what they do best!

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