



SUPPORTING LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

Submission by:

Dr Soizic Le Courtois

Manogya Sahay

Qiming Liu

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PEDAL (Centre for Play in Education, Development and Learning)

Key points

- **Play can take many forms but not all children like to play in the same way.**
- **Play is in the eye of the beholder: it is only play if children experience it as play.**
- **Play has many benefits for children's learning and development, but these may be different depending on the kind of play – we need to be careful not to overgeneralise.**
- **Adults (e.g. teachers and parents) can play an important role in supporting children's learning through play, but they should be partners in play and not take over with an adult agenda.**
- **Playful learning may not look like typical play but has its essential characteristics: children's agency and motivation. This might include projects and self-directed learning. Playful learning should sit alongside (not replace) free play, which is a vital form of rest and leisure.**
- **There has been a recent tendency to 'schoolify' play in order to meet school objectives, or to make school activities superficially game-like to make them more appealing ('chocolate-covered broccoli'). This goes against the principles of what play is, and risks undermining efforts to improve children's access to play and learning through play.**
- **Accountability and policy pressures lead teachers to tightly control what children learn, instead of giving them agency in their learning. These pressures also limit opportunities for genuine play.**

Recommendations

- **Embed the benefits of play into policy language:**
 - Policies should recognise the educational benefits of play and playful learning as well as the importance of play for children's wellbeing, without distorting the concept. This includes the EYFS framework, which could be improved to better support children's genuine play, but also other policies relating to health, wellbeing and support for families as well as policies relating to older children.

- This shift will ensure that play is not sidelined but embraced as a core part of the educational experience, particularly in early childhood.
- Take into account a much broader range of research and evidence to understand the rich evidence base for learning through play
 - Policies should take into account the rich heritage of research on children's play rather than rely only on experimental evidence.
 - Children's own voices and wellbeing should play an integral role in understanding the role of play to children's lives and should be recognised as an essential form of evidence.
- Provide the conditions for children to have agency in their learning and to experience learning and play on their own terms.
 - Learning through play and playful learning are about children engaging in activities from a place of agency and inner motivation.
 - Current accountability systems put pressure on schools, leading to controlling teaching practices and less opportunity for play and playful learning for children. These need to be reformed and the pressure eased off or play will continue to be sidelined or distorted to meet adult objectives. These pressures could be lightened through supportive (rather than punitive) accountability frameworks, removing high stakes testing, in particular in Primary schools, and being mindful of this pressure during curriculum redesigns to avoid 'trickle down'. Reforms to Ofsted and providing appropriate training to Ofsted inspectors who visit Early Years may also help improve understanding of play and learning through play.
 - Teachers and schools need agency and the right set of skills in order to provide the conditions for learning through play.
- Invest in play through parenting and teaching programmes that value play and help adults develop the skills to engage with children's play:
 - More investments should be directed in testing and scaling play-based parenting interventions as local services. Embedding these services in partnership with Local Authorities will not only address the growing demand for quality parental support but also foster early development of vital cognitive, language, and socio-emotional skills in children.
 - Adults may dismiss play as unimportant or something children outgrow. However, it is essential that parents or adults who work with children are informed on the

significant impact play has on their child's development and what they can do to engage in their child's play as well as the importance of free play.

Supporting learning through play – a brief review

1. What children learn through play

Our society has an ambiguous relationship with play. Whilst play has long been considered trivial and not serious (1), there is increasing recognition that it forms an essential part of children's learning and development throughout childhood and in particular in the first years of life (2–4). This increased recognition is visible not only in academic research but also in the wider society. According to the 2022 LEGO Play Well Study, which surveyed over 57,000 people across 35 countries, 95% of children said play helps them learn new things and makes them relax, and 88% of parents agreed that play is essential for learning.

This is not only the opinion of parents and children: large amounts of evidence show that play is essential to children's development, learning and wellbeing (5–8).

A large body of research, in particular qualitative studies digging deep into what happens when children play, shows that all kinds of play help children make sense of the world around them. When children explore objects and ideas, repeat actions, make up fantasy worlds, imitate the activities of adults, and jump, run and climb, this all contributes to their physical, social and cognitive development (7,9–14). Through play, children can also explore academic content such as mathematical concepts, literacy and scientific knowledge (6,15,16) and play also supports 'soft skills' such as self-regulation and metacognition (17–21).

However, play is varied and can be hard to pin down (22). Play can be solitary (23) or involve talk and social interactions (16). It can be directed towards learning, rest, making friends, or processing emotions (2,6,24). Play can also look different for children from different cultures (9,25) or for neurodivergent children (23), whose play may not fit adults' ideas of what play should look like (26). Indeed, missing from much of the discussion on the benefits of play are the children's voices: their experiences and views on the value of play to their lives.

The diversity of play means that the benefits of play may not always be the same for all kinds of play or for all children. Whilst we can recognise that all play is 'educational' in the broad sense (5,27), we need to be careful not to over-generalise the benefits of play. Similarly, a focus on outcomes may lead parents or teachers to limit or extinguish children's play by funneling it towards adult objectives. This does not mean that children's play is out of bounds for adults – in fact, adults can be important play partners.

2. Partners in play: the role of adults in supporting children's learning through play

2.1 From stage manager to co-player

Adults have an important role in children's play experiences, both in school and at home (28). This role can range from a 'stage manager' (creating the right environment for play) to being a co-player or 'actor' inside the children's play (29,30).

In early childhood settings, adults are usually responsible for designing and setting up the environment to facilitate children's play. For example, when setting up the play area, adults consider if the resources meet the children's interests, are age appropriate and enable a range of play opportunities. This could mean the inclusion of play resources which are versatile and can be used alongside children's imagination, such as block play (31) activities that will lend themselves to children exploring numeracy or literacy concepts (15,32), as well as incorporating activities that will stimulate or follow up on children's interests (33–35).

Adults can also actively take part in children's play by taking on a mutual and supporting role, offering new play experiences or extending play whilst following the child's lead and being responsive to children (7,22,36,37). For instance, when playing with blocks to build high towers, the adult could suggest using the same toy for new experiences, such as creating structures, ordering by size or even counting, if this is of interest to the children (38). Adults' involvement can help children continue to engage in play (39) and adults may sometimes actively teach children through play (40). However, it is important that adults do not 'hijack' children's play to meet curricular objectives (28), but instead follow children's interests and ideas in the moment (36,37,40). For example, if a teacher joins a child's play and redirects it to a learning objective they have in mind, this may lead to the child losing interest and the play and interactions fizzling out, rather than becoming the rich kind of meaning making that happens when children deeply engage.

Adults can also involve children in reflecting on their play. For example, did the child come across any challenges, such as with sharing or playing with others? What would they like to play next? By modelling and guiding children in this way, they help children reflect and develop their social and emotional learning skills (41). These conversations can help them recognise how others felt during shared play, as well as how to help us prepare for the next play session.

But adults, too, need to reflect on their play. When supporting children with their play, adults need to be responsive to the needs of the child (42). While some children will need more support in specific situations, we must always be thinking about how to embed child agency into their play experiences so that the play continues to be their own.

2.2 Playful interactions to build language and understanding

Interactions with adults through play are rich opportunities to build language and help children make sense of their knowledge and ideas. Research on parent-child interactions as well as teacher-child interactions show that when adults pay attention to what children are interested in, take turns with them in conversation and build on what the children are saying, they build children's language and vocabulary. These interactions form an essential part of how children acquire language (43–45). One of the most powerful forms of interactions between caregivers and young children has been coined 'serve and return': children 'serve' by initiating an interaction and adults 'return' by building on the child's serve (46). If families and early years professionals are supported and empowered to have rich interactions with young children, this could help mitigate the setbacks of socioeconomic disadvantage on children's development (47–51).

Book sharing programmes are one example of interventions designed to support parents in playful, child-led interactions (52). PEDAL's Playtime with Books intervention supports parents to engage with their children by using books in an interactive and playful manner rather than simply reading, for example by asking questions, pointing out objects that the child is curious about, and making connections to the child's experiences. Not only can these interactions strengthen children's language skills and deepen parent-child interactions (52), but parents love the experience of book sharing and find it easy to put into practice. Playtime with Books parents have commented:

"fantastic way to teach parents how to have fun learning how to explore books with their children"

"a really positive experience that gave me more confidence in understanding how to help my child get the most out of reading stories together. It helped me to build on the good practices we already had, and gave me some new ideas. My child has really enjoyed the daily book sharing and I think it's really helping with his understanding and language."

Such interventions show the power of play-based parenting approaches, which can be a valuable part of local services to support early child development.

Interactions with adults, as well as with other children, also help extend children's knowledge and understanding by introducing new ideas and helping children negotiate meaning (53,54). Play allows children to access concepts and ideas that they would not experience in daily life, and to experiment and test these ideas in an emotionally safe way. One important way in which adults can 'scaffold', or support, children's thinking is through sustained interactions where children discuss ideas, solve problems and make links between their ideas. This leads to deep learning and understanding. These kinds of interactions are spontaneous and can happen in the context of talking about books but also through children's curiosity-driven exploration of the world around

them (34,55) as well as pretend play (33,54). However, as with supporting children's play without hijacking it, sustaining children's meaning making requires a high level of responsivity as well as knowing what questions and scaffolds best enhance children's thinking. In the context of early education settings, professionals may require support to develop this set of skills (47,48).

2.3 The socio-emotional side of adults' role in play

It is important to recognise that play has a role not only in the acquisition of academic content, but also a range of socio-emotional skills such as understanding emotions, sharing and taking turns, negotiating, resolving conflicts and helping others (56). In play, children practice their self-regulation skills as they set themselves goals, and may need to adjust their plan or deal with difficult emotions when they face setbacks (21,42,56). Play offers a motivating context for practicing and supporting these skills, as challenges will inevitably occur. Adults can seize these 'difficult moments' as learning opportunities for children to learn and practice important skills (57–59). For example, adults can:

- act as mediators to help children solve problems on their own;
- articulate children's emotions to build their awareness of their own and others' feelings;
- co-regulate children when they are overwhelmed;
- adapt tasks so that they are not too difficult;
- and provide encouragement.

However, whilst play is an important opportunity for learning these skills, it is also important to recognise the essential role play has in creating caring relationships between children and adults, peers and the world around them (60,61). Play builds feelings of joy, safety, connection and belonging, all of which are essential to children's wellbeing and healthy development. In addition, whilst here we have argued that adults play an important role in supporting children's learning through play, we must also recognise the need and benefit for children to play without adults, as well as the role that other children, in particular in mixed age groups, have in supporting each other's play (62).

Whilst learning through play has been primarily studied in the early years, many of the benefits described above still hold for older children. However, when it comes to the acquisition of more advanced formal content, learning that builds on the strengths of play can offer an alternative to didactic methods.

3. Playful learning: children's agency and inner motivation

Playful learning (as opposed to simply 'learning that naturally happens through play') is generally considered to be learning that is more intentional but has characteristics of play: it is active, meaningful, usually socially interactive, joyful and iterative (i.e. there are opportunities to test and refine ideas) (1,63). In addition, for learning to be truly play-like, there is general understanding that it must involve children's agency and consent: children must be the ones taking the lead, and it cannot be imposed. In other words, children must be engaging willingly and from a place of inner motivation (42).

However, there is a tendency to equate playful learning with adult-directed games or types of 'guided play' that are little more than didactic activities disguised as games. Guided play in this sense is a flexible activity that has a "clear learning goal in mind" (64,65). It has garnered research interest and press coverage because it lends itself well to experimental studies and these have shown positive impacts on learning, for example through mathematical games (66,67). However, whilst educational games may have a place if they are enjoyed by children, there is a lot more to playful learning. For example, truly open-ended projects, where children can take the lead, experiment and co-create the content and the purpose (68–70) are closer in nature to play than adult-led activities, playful as they may be. Open access to activities which children can choose for themselves, for example in Montessori classrooms, also supports learning in a self-directed and agentic way (32). Adults as well as older children also play an important role in helping children learn by taking part in genuine everyday activities and becoming active participants in their communities, in ways that have many of the same qualities as playful learning (12).

4. Avoiding the danger of the schoolification of play

When play is introduced back into the Primary classroom, it encounters adult-imposed expectations: through curricula and institutional frameworks, adults usually decide what and how children learn. In the playful classroom, these can be negotiated, and room can be made for children to take ownership of their learning (71).

However, top down pressures such as high stakes accountability, national tests and rigid policy frameworks can make it impossible for teachers to carve out space for playful learning, let alone free play (72–74). In our work with teachers in England, we found that Ofsted, curriculum pressures, high stakes tests and top-down pressures from senior leaders, as well as a mindset focused on productivity and standards all contributed to teachers' struggles to implement playful practices and support children's autonomy and agency in learning (74). Teachers in our project frequently commented on this:

“ there’s so many constraints around what you have to do ... there is an expectation on what you’re teaching in terms of outcomes, but also what it looks like in books, the evidence trail [providing evidence of children’s progress for accountability purposes] even for topic, they expect things to look a certain way”

“ It’s just so difficult when you have to balance the SATs results and the data”

This is not only the case in Primary schools. There has been an increasing tendency to ‘schoolify’ the early years, with a trickle down of academic expectations and frameworks in earlier and earlier age groups in the name of school readiness (72,75,76). This has not only pushed out play, replacing it by adult-led content, it has also resulted in a narrative around play that is driven by the need to meet outcomes rather than understanding play as a fluid and unpredictable process that needs to be driven by the experiences of children (72,76–78). We need to be careful not to turn play into work by distorting play into didactic content disguised as play, or ‘chocolate-covered broccoli’(63), in the pursuit of academic outcomes. Real play needs time and space, and it is not a tool at the service of adults. To illustrate this, we wish to end with a story.

The story (79) goes that a man seeking relief from his suffering went to a Buddhist temple to learn transcendental meditation. He asked the Master how long it would take for him to reach transcendence if he meditated 4 hours a day.

“ If you meditate for 4 hours a day, it will take you 10 years,” replied the Master.

“ What if I meditate for 8 hours a day,” asked the man, thinking he could do better.

“ If you meditate for 8 hours a day,” replied the Master, “it will take you 20 years”.

As with meditation, play is not best understood in terms of productivity (80,81). By making children play ‘better ’and ‘more usefully’, we risk missing the point of play – and its benefits – entirely.

Indeed, the Master explained, “ You are not here to sacrifice your joy or your life. You are here to live, to be happy and to love”.

This is a lesson we could all do to remember when thinking about the importance of learning through play: to live, to be happy and to love.

Further reading

- Slow knowledge and the unhurried child, by Alison Clark.
- Playful mathematics for children 3-7, by Helen Williams.
- A Pedagogy of Play, by Project Zero, Harvard
- Empowering play in primary education, edited by Aimee Durning (University of Cambridge Primary School), Sara Baker (PEDAL) and Paul Ramchandani (PEDAL).
- Article on playful pedagogies by PEDAL researchers Soizic Le Courtois and Sara Baker: <https://my.chartered.college/early-childhood-hub/how-montessori-reggio-emilia-and-mantle-of-the-expert-support-childrens-agency-in-their-learning/>

See also playful-learning.org for the professional development programme developed by PEDAL to support teachers reflecting on children's agency in learning.

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