

Playful Pedagogy

The Importance of Play in Early Learning

Key Sources of

Professional Reading:

- Alexander, E. (2016) *Play-based Learning in Early Education*
- Bruce, T. (2015) *Early Childhood Education*
- [Casey, T & Robertson, J. \(2016\) *Loose Parts Play– A Toolkit*](#)
- [Learning and Teaching Scotland \(2006\) *The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Years Education*](#)
- [Play Scotland \(2011\) *Getting it Right for Play*](#)
- [Scott-McKie, L & Casey, T. \(2017\) *Play Types Toolkit*](#)
- [Play Scotland \(Website\)](#)
- [Upstart Scotland \(Website\)](#)
- [Wood, E. & Chesworth, L. \(2017\) *Play And Pedagogy, in Early Childhood*](#)

National & Fife Policy

& Documentation

- [Care Inspectorate \(2016\) *My World Outdoors*](#)
- [Douglas, H. \(2015\) *Solihul Approach Resource Pack - 5th Ed*](#)
- [Education Scotland \(2015\) *How Good Is Our School 4*](#)
- [Education Scotland \(2016\) *How Good Is Our Early Learning And Childcare?*](#)
- [Scottish Government \(2007\) *Building the Curriculum 2: Active Learning In The Early Years*](#)
- [Scottish Government \(2008a\) *Equally Well*](#)
- [Scottish Government \(2008b\) *The Early Years Framework*](#)
- [Scottish Government \(2008c\) *The Early Years Framework: Part II*](#)
- [Scottish Government \(2008d\) *Achieving Our Potential*](#)
- [Scottish Government \(2012\) *A Guide to Getting It Right For Every Child*](#)
- [Scottish Government \(2013a\) *Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision*](#)
- [Scottish Government \(2013b\) *Play*](#)

Introduction

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 has been the catalyst for a shift in thinking around what learning and teaching should look like in the Early Years in Scotland. For the purposes of this paper, play-based learning will be discussed with a focus on 'Early Years' which refers to nursery to P2. There is now an acknowledgement of the importance of play-based learning beyond nursery. In Fife we are working towards a consistent approach to curriculum delivery in the Early Years.

“Children who become learners through play are more able to self-regulate and are more self-motivated when it comes to accessing more formal teaching” (Alexander, 2016)

This, of course, is entirely dependent on the quality of play and the skill of the practitioner; not all ways of free play are equally effective as learning opportunities (Alexander, 2016). Children's experiences must always be developmentally appropriate and integrated in meaningful contexts. Skilled staff should also provide a wide range of experiences, opportunities and resources. During play, adults have a critical role to play, stepping into conversations and play situations to deepen understanding and scaffold learning, and know the moment to stand back to allow children to find out for themselves.

Our aim is to develop a clear understanding of how children learn through high-quality play across early years settings in Fife. Play is not an easy concept to define. Staff, parents and partners should be supported to recognise and understand the value of this approach to learning beyond 'just play'.

“Investing in children's play is one of the most important things we can do to improve children's health and wellbeing in Scotland.”

(Sir Harry Burns, Former Chief Medical Officer Scotland)

The Progression Through Early Level (PEL) Team offer professional learning opportunities for all staff to support understanding and implementation of Fife's approach to play-based learning. For more information, contact: Clark.Graham@fife.gov.uk

What Does Research and Literature Tell Us?

International research indicates that play-based learning in the early years may be associated with academic success. In a summary of educational achievement by PISA (Student Performance in Mathematics, Reading and Science) in 2013. The UK (which includes Scottish data) failed to reach the top 20 in any subject. All of the countries which outperformed the UK have a later school starting age, several of which start at age 7.

Finland, Estonia and Switzerland were the top three western countries in the 2015 OECD rankings for maths and science. Children in all three of these countries begin formal schooling at the age of seven and experience a play-based kindergarten approach prior to formal schooling. Key to this stage are the wide range of experiences and opportunities, provided by skilled staff, who understand the importance of stimulating children's curiosity and motivation to gain new skills.

It would appear that more active, child-initiated learning experiences enhance children's later school success. Furthermore, the introduction of more formalised learning experiences too early for their developmental stage could actually slow long term progress. (Alexander, 2016) Child-initiated learning, which we promote in nurseries across Fife, cultivates independent learners. It is crucial that we build on this in PI. Introducing formal, adult directed learning too soon could have an adverse impact on children's ability to think for themselves and take on responsibility for their own learning, the very skills they have been encouraged to develop in the nursery.

Definition

"Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child"
(Play Scotland, 2011)

National Policy Context

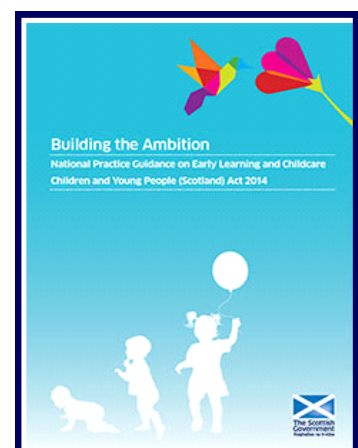
Fife Education and Children's services Directorate aims to improve life chances for all and is committed to closing the poverty-related attainment gap. This is in line with the Scottish Government's National Outcome that 'our children have the best start in life and are ready to succeed.' (National Performance Framework, 2016)

A Play Strategy for Scotland (Scottish Government, 2013a & b) clearly shows the link between play and improved physical and mental health, which in turn has a direct influence on other areas of life. It also highlights that '*play is not just crucial to the wellbeing of each child, it is essential to the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of Scotland as a whole.*'

Play Scotland (2011) states that the benefits children will have from a strategic approach to play include '*better physical, emotional and mental health, developing social skills and responsibility, appreciating the environment, understanding risk and challenge, growing identity and self-esteem, participating in sports, arts and culture and being less likely to offend and engage in anti-social behaviour.*'

Building the Curriculum 2 (Scottish Government, 2007) explores the need for children to have developmentally appropriate practice which will be most conducive to effective learning. For example, it suggests that '*there is no long-term advantage to children when there is an over-emphasis on systematic teaching before 6 or 7 years of age.*' '*Practical experience provides a secure basis for subsequent theory.*'

Building the Ambition (Scottish Government, 2014) provides practitioners with clear guidance on how to ensure young children have rich, quality play experiences. It discusses the links between play and learning and the idea that when playing, children try out ideas and come to a better understanding of thoughts and concepts as they play.



A High Quality Learning Environment

The learning environment has a direct influence on how and what our learners experience and learn. Reggio Emilia ([Learning & Teaching Scotland, 2006](#)) approaches refer to the environment as the 'third teacher' and it should reflect and support our philosophy and curriculum. Inside and out will look different to reflect the physical space we have access to, and also the particular cohort of learners. It should be flexible to change and grow with the interests and stages of development of our learners. However, some key principles will support staff when thinking about their own setting.

We need our environments to be 'reassuringly familiar yet excitingly different.' So our environments and experiences need to provide the security of the calm, responsive and familiar, yet have scope for new challenging and stimulating opportunities which will engage our children and develop their learning. We need lots of opportunities for concrete, hands-on activities. Young children learn best through rich, stimulating experiences where they can manipulate resources and revisit previous learning through practice and exploration, linking their learning in a holistic way.

We need to provide a variety of appropriate resources and experiences, which are well organised and enable learners to independently access and make progression through their relevant developmental stage. Resources should be attractive, of a high quality and suitable for purpose. Practitioners should be clear about the specific learning purpose of resources. They should be flexible, open ended and stimulate curiosity and creativity. Learner's current interests and enquiries should be reflected and they should feel and involved in decisions to do with shaping their own learning environment. This includes regularly reviewing and refreshing provision.

Environments should be calm and clutter free. Thought needs to be given to the use of colour and types of materials. Overly stimulating environments can have an impact on mood and emotions which can therefore have an impact on learning. The layout and use of space will also influence how children play and learn.

Features of Highly Effective Practice

- Understanding and evaluating play on the basis of its value for children's actual life
- Raise the profile of play and deepen the understanding of practitioners in supporting play experiences
- Priority focus on pedagogy of interactions and experiences which support the curriculum and the process of how children learn
- Recognition that the **how** and the **what** children learn are inseparable (content of the curriculum)
- Awareness of the relevance and breadth of the curriculum and provision of experiences which are developmentally appropriate
- Access to good quality open spaces
- Balance of risk and challenge ([managing risk in play](#))
- High-quality resources available in every classroom and outdoor space, e.g. loose parts play
- High level of understanding of adult role in participation in role-play and narratives
- Adults skilled in use of open-ended questioning; questioning that extends learning
- Teachers who judiciously plan, manage and assess learning, in synergy with other pedagogical approaches, ensuring that the learning experience is tailored to the needs and developmental stages of their learners.

Implications

- Importance of scrutiny of the role of the adult and the resources made available.
- Consideration to level of adult participation and capacity of adult to meet the basic demands of children's play.
- Need for focus on adult-child verbal interactions.
- Deep understanding of child development is required by all practitioners.
- Development of skills in data collection methods and tools for effective assessment through play.
- Need for developing systematic methods of recording, reviewing and learning from innovation and evidence.
- Outdoor play can be a major contributor to outcomes around physical activity.
- Awareness that despite good pedagogic intentions, adults may sometimes restrict young children's fields of activity in their attempts to develop and protect children against dangers (Wragg, 2013).

The Role Of Play In Learning

BUSTING THE MYTHS

MYTH

“Children won’t learn if they are just playing”

FACT

Through play, children develop mentally, emotionally, socially and physically (1).

Play encourages conflict resolution, self-regulation, empathy, social skills and knowledge of the world around them.

Self-image and creativity become meaningful when children have the opportunity to develop them on their own terms through child-led play (6).

MYTH

“A focus on play in P1 will result in children falling behind in their attainment”

FACT

Recent research (9, 10, 11), indicates that beginning formalised education too early can be detrimental to a child’s development.

Children who are forced to undertake learning experiences they are not developmentally ready to accommodate, can experience stress which may be harmful to brain development (3, 4, 7, 8)

Play-based learning is experiential and occurs in a stress free, self-sustaining environment that is deeply rooted in the children’s own world and developmentally appropriate context.

MYTH

“There is no role for adults in children’s play”

FACT

The crucial role that practitioners have in supporting and scaffolding the children’s learning through play cannot be underestimated.

Well timed and skillful interventions from adults will effectively promote children’s creativity, extend their thinking, widen their skills and consolidate their learning in play.

The key role of the adult is to know when to step into conversations and play situations to ask probing questions, such as ‘What would happen if...’ And then know the moment to stand back to let the children find out for themselves.

Through this involvement, adults are then well placed to plan for and provide future play experiences that are rich, relevant and challenging for the children in their class.

MYTH

“‘Learning’ and ‘play’ are two separate activities. A School’s responsibility should focus on learning.”

FACT

Although learning can take place without play; learning always takes place whenever play is happening.

The rich, experiential learning that typically occurs through child-initiated play is more beneficial and enduring in the early years.

Play-based learning and educator-led learning are complimentary and are the responsibility of all schools and Early Learning Centres.

MYTH

“Play limits social interactions between children and adults.”

FACT

Adults as well as children can initiate play.

In instances where play is initiated entirely from a child’s own volition, there is still a significant role for adults.

Educators are uniquely placed to enrich and extend children’s socio-linguistic learning experiences through play.

‘Busting The Myths’ Bibliography:

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