Play-Based Learning

What does ‘play-based learning’ mean?
According to the Early Years Learning Framework Play-Based Learning is ‘a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations.’ The Framework elaborates this definition noting that:

‘Play is a context for learning that:
  • allows for the expression of personality and uniqueness
  • enhances dispositions such as curiosity and creativity
  • enables children to make connections between prior experiences and new learning
  • assists children to develop relationships and concepts
  • stimulates a sense of wellbeing.’

Why is play-based learning important?
As the CEOWA Positional Statement says:
  Play is a vehicle for learning which involves a range of opportunities to explore, imagine, investigate and engage in purposeful and meaningful experiences. It is through play-based experiences that children make sense of their world, as they engage with others and their environment. These learning opportunities are child initiated, with peer interaction and negotiated by the child with educators and adults.

While early childhood educators have understood this through many generations of practice wisdom, there is now a range of developmental and brain research to support this position. Children involved in learner-centred environments have better receptive verbal skills (Dunn, Slomkowski and Beardall, 1994) and are more confident in their cognitive abilities. Play is essential for healthy development as it seems to facilitate the linkages of language, emotion, movement, socialisation and cognition (Frost 1998). Play deprivation may result in aberrant behaviour. (More to be included here about the relevant research.)

What does play-based learning look like in practice?
In good quality early years settings children will be seen to be actively engaged in construction, manipulation of materials, explorations with media, investigations of their environment, and interactions with peers and adults. The learning environment will be prepared in such a way that children can initiate play-based learning experiences and be supported in them by adults and other children. As the CEOWA Positional Statement on the Early Years says ‘Educators take on many roles in play with children, move flexibly in and out of these different roles and draw on different strategies as the context changes.’ Literacy and numeracy knowledge and skills will be embedded in the play-based experiences. Incidental teaching arises from the observation of the children’s play providing just-in-time skills and knowledge that enriches and extends children’s learning. Planning documents will show educators’ planning for play and the environment. Assessment documents will include evidence of play-based learning experiences and the progress towards learning outcomes observed during these experiences.
What you will not see

- Play restricted to recess times or other prescribed times of the day
- ‘Play’ contrasted to ‘work’
- Educators neither planning for nor participating in children’s play
- No monitoring or assessment of children’s learning from their participation in play-based learning experiences
- Children engaged only in trivial rather than rich play

Some questions to think about

- Who is initiating the play in your early years setting?
- What role are you playing in the children’s play?
- What are the links between intentional teaching and play-based learning experiences in your setting?

Some things to do

- Observe children’s play indicating several difference genres (i.e. object study, idea study, social study, role study, power study, physical study, language study, spatial study, construction study, music study, work study). Find some way to extend the opportunities being offered to other genres.
- Observe the play-based learning and identify and record the learning outcomes being demonstrated (see the ELYF for some ways you might do this.)
- Plan a play-based learning experience that extends a child-initiated play activity that you have observed.

Some more to read

Gretchen Owocki, *Imaginative Play: Literacy through Play*

Marilyn Fleer, *The Theory of Play*
