



WHAT IS PLAY?

Play is not defined by a particular activity or age. Across decades of research, there is remarkable agreement about the characteristics that make an experience genuinely playful.

THE SHARED CHARACTERISTICS OF PLAY

Play Is Characterised By...

Meaningful	Children see purpose in what they are doing.
Actively Engaging	Minds and bodies are involved.
Driven by Curiosity	Questions, exploration and discovery lead the experience.
Voluntary	Children experience genuine agency and choice.
Flexible	Ideas can change and evolve.
Socially Connected	Learning often happens with and alongside others.
Imaginative	Possibilities extend beyond the immediate situation.
Joyful	Positive emotions help sustain engagement and learning.

WHAT DO RESEARCHERS EMPHASISE?



Gray (2013)	The Lego Foundation (2025)	Brown & Vaughan (2009)	Zosh et al., (2017)	Garvey (1990)
Freedom Intrinsic Motivation	Joyful, meaningful, actively engaging, iterative and socially interactive learning.	Play across the lifespan	Five characteristics of playful learning	Voluntary and enjoyable experience

Different language. Shared ideas.

Across these perspectives, play is consistently associated with agency, engagement, meaning, flexibility and enjoyment.

WHAT IS PLAY?

REFLECTING ON PLAY

While researchers may describe play in different ways, the real challenge is recognising these characteristics in everyday classroom practice. Use the questions below to reflect on your own learning environment.

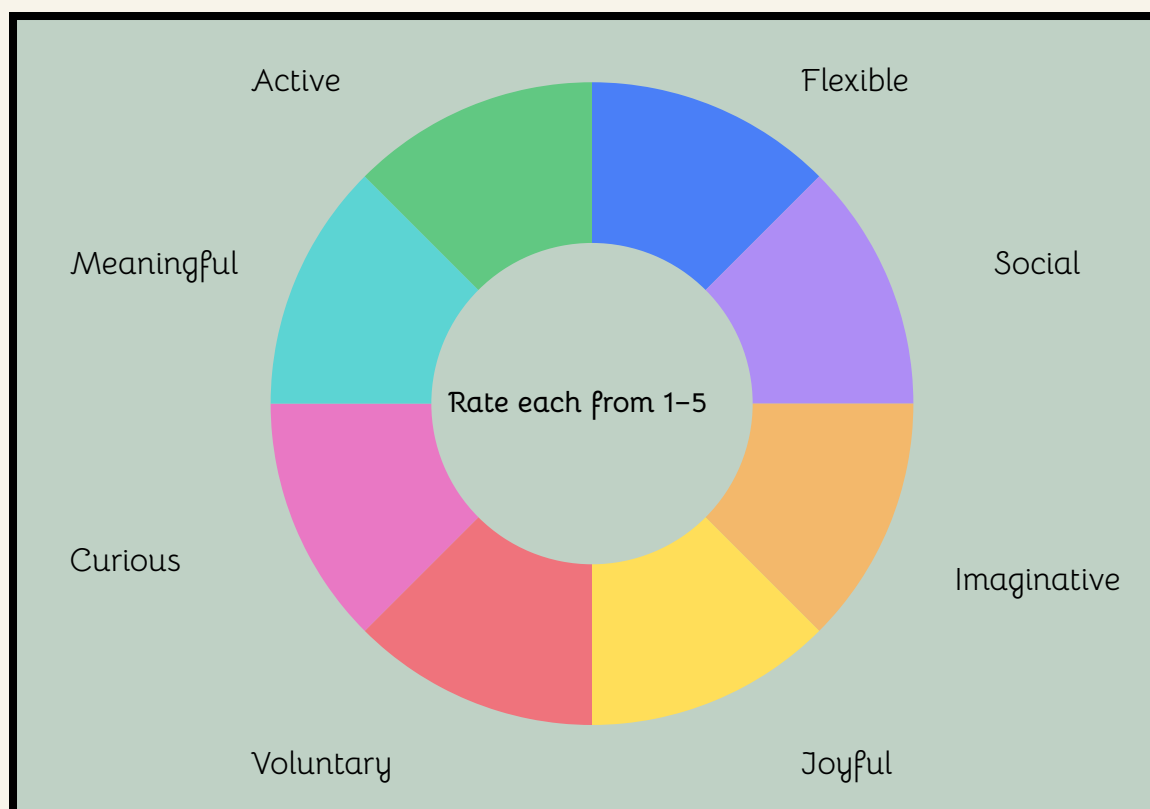
Observe your learners

- When do children appear most deeply engaged?
- Where do children have genuine agency and influence over their learning?
- Which experiences invite curiosity, exploration and possibility?

Reflect on your teaching

- Which characteristics of play are already strengths in your classroom?
- Which characteristics could be strengthened?
- What is one small change you could make this week?

HOW PLAYFUL ARE YOUR STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCES?



Play isn't defined by what children are doing. It is defined by the experience they are having.