WHY PLAY MATTERS

Evidence-informed insights for teaching and learning

Play offers opportunities to explore ideas, practise skills, build relationships and make sense of the world. Research connects playful experiences with important areas of learning and development, although outcomes depend on the experience, context and teaching.

SIX AREAS OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

01 EXECUTIVE FUNCTION

Planning, remembering rules, negotiating and adapting strategies can be part of complex play. Evidence for direct improvements in executive function is promising but mixed.

02 LITERACY

Pretend play, storytelling and shared projects give language and symbols meaningful purposes. These experiences complement, rather than replace, explicit reading and writing instruction.

03 MATHEMATICS

Building, games and investigations can involve patterns, quantity, measurement and spatial reasoning. Guided play has shown benefits for some early mathematics outcomes.

04 WELLBEING

Play can support connection, agency, belonging and emotional expression. Benefits depend on relationships, inclusion, safety and the quality of children’s experiences.

05 CREATIVITY

Open-ended play invites imagination, experimentation, alternative ideas and revising solutions. Knowledge, materials, time and a supportive environment all matter.

06 LIFELONG LEARNING

Playful experiences can encourage curiosity, persistence and flexible approaches. These dispositions matter across the years, but long-term causal claims require caution.

A NOTE ABOUT THE EVIDENCE

Different kinds of play offer different possibilities. Much of the research concerns early childhood and early primary education. Applying these ideas to older learners calls for thoughtful professional judgement, not assumptions of identical effects.

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WHY PLAY MATTERS

Reflecting on opportunities across the school years

WHERE ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES?

Playful learning changes with age: imaginative play and construction may develop into games, simulations, design challenges and open-ended inquiry. Use these prompts to examine what learners can actually experience.

EXECUTIVE FUNCTION	Where can learners plan, negotiate, make decisions and revise strategies?
LITERACY	Where does talk, reading, writing or storytelling serve a meaningful purpose?
MATHEMATICS	Where do learners encounter worthwhile problems involving quantity, space or patterns?
WELLBEING	Where do learners experience choice, connection, belonging and accessible participation?
CREATIVITY	Where can learners experiment, generate alternatives and shape an outcome?
LIFELONG LEARNING	Where can curiosity lead to revisiting ideas, persisting and trying again?

A QUICK REVIEW OF OUR LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

- [ ] Learners have meaningful opportunities to make decisions.
- [ ] There is room for open-ended exploration and experimentation.
- [ ] Learners can revisit ideas rather than always moving on.
- [ ] Playful opportunities extend beyond the earliest years.
- [ ] We balance exploration with intentional and explicit teaching.
- [ ] Different learners can participate in meaningful ways.

ONE SMALL CHANGE WE COULD MAKE

What is one practical change we could make this term?

Play does not replace teaching. It creates possibilities for learners to explore, apply and deepen what they know.

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