**‘To play or not to play’: The role of the adult in understanding and collaborating in children’s play**

This fact sheet is for educators who want to better understand:

* the role of the adult in supporting children’s learning and development through play
* how to build reciprocal relationships where children and adults are co-contributors to the creative process.

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| When we think about play within the early learning context, we often think of it as being ‘fun’ and occurring naturally – it is often referred to as being universally understood.  Is this the case, or is it more complicated than that? |

Children’s play encompasses many ways of being and becoming. Play is linked to fun, but this is just one way of being and does not speak to the complexity of play. Fun is fleeting. Parts of play can be joyful, frustrating, exciting, annoying, challenging, hilarious and, at times, uncomfortable. Play includes many emotions and experiences. Sometimes children are excluded from other children’s play – is this fun? What children are doing in play is complex – navigating limbs, expressing ideas, listening to others, creating novel worlds and negotiating with peers. Therefore, the emotions and feelings that children experience are varied.

Children are experimenting with and expressing their worlds, and the collaborative activity of play requires many skills. Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2016) tell us that in play ‘children are constructing an identity – who they are, what they know and what their joys and fears are, as well as their sense of belonging to a family and a community’ (p. 3). This understanding captures the richness of play, which is not limited to one way of being. Seeing children’s play as multifaceted allows educators to holistically understand children in the early childhood context.

Play is a universal activity that children engage in, as reflected in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). But while there are similarities that occur in children’s play across the world, when we look at and hear what children are doing and expressing in their play, we see that it is also informed by their culture. For example, in dramatic play, being ‘Bluey’ or making cakes in the sand pit are activities that are directly taken from the child’s day-to-day culture. The people, places, objects, practices and rituals in the child’s culture fuel their play, and play is thus an expression that reflects the culture the play is taking place within.

Children bring into the early childhood setting individual, family and community experiences that reflect their culture, giving educators a rich tapestry to understand the child’s perspective of their world. Roopnarine’s (2011) quote is helpful to understand the links between play and culture: ‘A fundamental problem with universal claims about play is that they basically ignore contrasting realities of childhood experiences and cultural forces that may help shape caregivers ideas about play and early learning, and children’s role in their own play.’ (p. 20)

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| Given that there are many different theories that inform our approaches to children’s learning and development, does the role of the adult vary in supporting children’s development in play? |

Theories can inform teaching practice, as being able to hold other ideas and perspectives allows us to see things differently. Theory is helpful for understanding the world around us, and in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) context, theories can inform and change our practice.

Developmental theories are varied and vast, and contemporary framings have become quite different from the more foundational knowledge, reflecting the diversity of our societies. The field is not stuck on linear and fixed stages. Practitioners work with the children in their care, taking into consideration their contexts, environments and families, and using various theories and research to inform their practice.

Teaching practice varies, and theory and research can assist educators’ practice. For example, contemporary theories remind us that children’s play is not simply something that happens naturally; these theories consider group dynamics, equity, social justice, advantage and disadvantage, and the way power moves between the players. They also explore the ways that understanding children’s lives outside the early childhood setting can inform teaching and program planning. Contemporary theories can open us up to other views, and while many of these have existed for a very long time, they haven’t always been prioritised to think about children, context, difference and learning.

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| How can we ensure that the play opportunities we create for children help build collaborative and reciprocal relationships between adult and child? |

The following diagram from page 15 of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) shows the three aspects of integrated teaching and learning, and holds great clues about the educator’s role in children’s play.

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This diagram can be used by educators and teams to reflect on their practice. G*uided play and learning* prioritise the educator responding to spontaneous learning opportunities. Reciprocal two-way exchanges create a balance of children guiding adults, and adults guiding children­ in dialogue and action. This becomes an improvisation that follows unknown paths, opening up opportunities to collaborate by creating something that did not exist before. When adults are playful with children, multiple perspectives are valued in the collaborative space.

Thinking of educators as co-contributors to the creative process of play speaks to the notion of responding to children’s interests. However, it is useful to adapt this slightly to instead think about responding to the child’s learning. Interests can be transient and surface-level; focusing on children’s learning is more expansive and process-orientated, as learning involves both thinking and enacting through play. This way of working asks educators to respond to spontaneous opportunities that arise, and play affords this responsive practice. Play is a relational activity between children and place, children and objects, children and children, and between children and adults.

Educators are respectfully cognisant of not wanting to take over too much control of children’s play, and when they improvise with children, finding a balance offollowing and leading, they can incorporate multiple children’s ideas and wonderings in the embodied play narratives.When teachers make use of children’s expertise, it supports children’s agency as their decisions influence the current events within the play. The playful interactions between the educator and children are fluid and unpredictable, mirroring drama pedagogue’s use of an improvised inquiry. Of course, we would not advocate that the educator enters children’s play all the time; this does not align philosophically with play and the ECEC context. However, at times, being a co-player with children speaks to a responsive pedagogy where creative collaborations can occur in play.

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| What is the relationship between play and learning? |

When adults engage in play with children, they can incorporate formative assessment to develop their understandings of the children and inform their planning. Socio-dramatic play is one way children express their imagination. When educators are with children, they are hearing and seeing children’s imaginations enacted, giving rich information about their learning. In play, children are also blocking out other distractions to problem-solve in the moment, and taking on other perspectives, both from other players and in their own role-play. These are all skills that are linked to our executive function, which is the ‘process of how we learn’ (Yogman et al. 2018, p. 6).

When educators are respectfully engaging with children in play, they are part of the collaboration, co-creating something that is novel and only exists between the people in this activity. If educators are only observing from the outside, how can they understand this process? When educators are part of children’s play, they are in the heart of the learning, and it can open up opportunities for understanding children’s working theories and learning processes. What the educator notes when they engage in the play can be documented as part of the planning cycle, and analysed so that understanding the child’s learning within play is extended through planning.

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| The Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw is quoted as saying, ‘We don’t stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.’  What do you think this quote says about the importance of educators themselves engaging in play? |

Being in children’s play can be joyful and humorous, and this shared space is one that can have a positive effect for educators too. The educational theorist John Dewey (2005) informs us that when a person has ‘complete absorption in subject matter that is fresh’, it ‘holds and sustains emotion’ (p. 73). Adults being absorbed in children’s play allows them to explore their own skills in improvisation and playfulness, and these can be used in many areas of life not limited to play.

Children can guide adults in the process to collaboratively follow unknown paths in the play landscapes, take risks and create narratives together. When adults are co-players in the play, it offers opportunities to learn with children, and this can be used to inform next steps in their learning journeys, using the planning cycle. The relationships we build in children’s play offer a different type of relational knowledge as we co-create with children in the process. Thinking about play as a creative space where children enact their imagination also ‘wakes up the adult’s own imagination’ (Brėdikytė & Hakkarainen 2011).

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**Additional resources that might be useful.**

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