

Introduction

Play is important for a child's all-round development. Children find play very satisfying and it should not be undervalued as 'just playing'. Sometimes it is difficult for adults to appreciate all the benefits play offers, as these may not be immediately obvious.

What is play?

Play is not easy to define. The lies in the fact that play embraces so many different features. It may be useful to consider some of them:

- play reflects real-life experiences
- play allows children to imagine they are something or someone else
- play is all-consuming and allows children to develop their imagination
- play allows the child to practise and refine current skills without pressure and does not demand a specific sequence
- play is voluntary and no child should be forced to play.
- children can play on their own (solitary play); looking-on; or alongside each other without necessarily playing with the same plaything or being directly involved with each other (parallel play). Children will play together (co-operative play) and later still be involved in more sophisticated scenarios (complex co-operative play).

Child playing alone



Play is beneficial because:

- children gain emotional satisfaction from playing and will thrive if they are given a range of play activities
- children can work through any anxieties and fears during play
- children experience a sense of freedom and control in their play activities
- children benefit from social interaction with other children and adults
- children begin to explore and make sense of the world
- children learn vocabulary and turn-taking in conversation
- children develop imagination, curiosity and problem-solving skills
- children develop their fine and gross motor skills, and hand-eye co-ordination
- children begin to understand 'right' and 'wrong' behaviour, value systems, honesty, respect, fairness and sharing with others.

Recognising play as a spontaneous activity

The wonderful thing about play is that most children can decide their own play and make use of limited resources in a creative way. This aspect is very important in an increasingly assessment-dominated educational climate. However, this does not mean that you do not take an active role in the play process.

You should consider how to develop:

- your professional understanding of yourself as a role model for children: for example, talking respectfully to children and adults
- your own knowledge and understanding of the importance of play
- a knowledge of play in relation to child development
- an understanding of how to plan for learning intentions: for example, being clear about what children are expected to learn
- an understanding of how to provide for 'extension' activities: for example, how one activity might lead to another
- an understanding of the way in which learning takes place as a 'whole': for example, consider all areas of development rather than narrowly focusing on one area alone
- a knowledge and understanding of cultural influences relating to play
- a knowledge and understanding of health and safety issues relating to play
- provision for a range of appropriate play materials
- provision for indoor and outdoor opportunities for play
- opportunities for children to interact and play with other children.