eduPLAY

Promoting High-Quality ECEC
through Education and Play in all-day settings

Teacher´s Guide to Play

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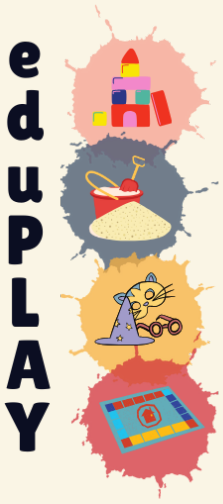

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Note on Gender Usage:

The use of the feminine form in this Teacher's guide is intended solely for reasons of readability and consistency. It does not imply any form of discrimination or exclusion. The content of this guide applies equally to individuals of all genders and aims to be inclusive and respectful to everyone.

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CONTENTS

Message from the EDUPLAY partnership

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) provides the foundation for children's future development and well-being and sets the tone for the society we aim to build. During these formative years, experiences in early childhood education should offer children equitable opportunities to explore their abilities, meet their needs, and develop their potential, both individually and as members of a group.

ECEC pedagogy draws on multiple disciplines, including pedagogy, sociology, psychology, neuroscience, and anthropology, to identify what is essential for young children to learn and develop to their fullest potential. In parallel, societies have increasingly recognised young children as competent individuals who can express their needs and actively participate in matters that concern them. Within this perspective, children's rights are frequently used to inform and justify pedagogical decisions. Play has long been recognized, historically and in contemporary practice, as a powerful context for learning and development, as a children's right that provides them with meaningful means of engagement.

Research and policy analyses, along with the contribution of pre-service and in-service ECEC teachers, headteachers, community leaders, and parents, have provided valuable insights into the role of play in supporting children's lives, lifelong learning outcomes, and broader societal impact.

The aim of this Teacher's Guide is to present a framework for play pedagogy that includes essential information to support reflective classroom practice and the implementation of intentional, research-based strategies. While the guide is aimed primarily at pre-service, in-service teachers and headteachers, it can also serve as a practical tool to support other people involved in children's lives, such as policymakers and parents.

We acknowledge the contributions of our European colleagues who are experts in ECEC and play research, and we extend our appreciation to all those who provided feedback throughout the development process. We hope this guide will serve as a meaningful resource that enriches children's lives by supporting everyday classroom practice, assisting leaders in planning professional development programs, and urging policymakers to recognize and strengthen the role of play within existing policies.

Message from the authors

Chapter 1: Project Overview

1.1 Project Context

The international need to improve the quality of ECEC has created a steady interest in children's play, from both researchers' and practitioners' points of view. Play, despite its popularity as a pedagogical tool in ECEC, remains a complex issue that does not translate easily into practice.

The EDUPLAY project is dedicated to enhancing the use of play in ECEC settings throughout Europe. EDUPLAY focuses on enhancing the knowledge and practice of pre and in-service ECEC teachers, regarding quality play. It aims to promote learning through play by involving a wide range of practices that can provide children with quality experiences and increased opportunities for developing their skills.

Partners	Role	
University of Cyprus	Coordinator	University of Cyprus (UCY)
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki Vytautas Magnus University Hogeschool ipabo Polytechnic Institute of Porto	Universities / ITE	University of Cyprus (UCY) Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) Hogeschool IPABO (IPABO) Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) Polytechnic Institute of Porto (IPP)
apei Associação de Profissionais de Educação de Infância	Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Provider	Associação de Profissionais de Educação de Infância (APEI)
P.PORTO	Training School	House of Stories - Istorijų namai

1.2 Consortium

The EDUPLAY project brings together organisations with substantial experience and expertise in ECEC, from Initial Teacher Education (ITE), and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) providers.

The EDUPLAY's consortium is coordinated by the University of Cyprus (UCY), which aims coherence and high-quality implementation across all aspects of the project. The consortium consists of partners from five European countries, bringing a broad and diverse range of pedagogical approaches, as well as professional and cultural perspectives.

1.3 Purpose and Objectives

The EDUPLAY project aims to enhance the role of play in ECEC settings across Europe and to strengthen the capacity of teachers to promote learning through play. Recognizing play as a fundamental component of early childhood learning, the project seeks to support teachers with tools, knowledge and practices that reinforce play pedagogy.

Eduplay Objectives

01 **To map the teachers' and leaders' needs and challenges.**

Focuses on mapping the current use of play in ECEC, both in pre-service teacher education and in in- service teachers' daily practice. It explores in-service and pre-service teachers' and headteachers needs and challenges, identifies gaps in existing professional development programs, and examines, and examines how play-related practices are shaped at classroom and school level.

02 **To enhance in-service and pre-service ECEC teachers' and leaders' competencies for effectively using play in their practice.**

Focuses on strengthening the knowledge and skills of pre and in-service ECEC teachers as well as headteachers so they can use play effectively, as a core pedagogical approach in their practice. A Teacher's Guide and a set of tools are developed to provide clear directions on how play can be meaningfully integrated into ECEC teaching and leadership. Based on this foundation, the project implements a needs-based Teacher Professional Development (TPD) program which, includes blended learning opportunities and digital learning resources, such as an eLearning platform and online courses, aligned with the content and recommendations of the Teacher's Guide.

03 **To raise awareness about the Importance of play and provide policy recommendations to enhance the use of play in ECEC across Europe.**

Focuses on extending the impact of the project beyond the classroom by raising awareness about the importance of play and contributing to policy dialogue at the European level. Through collaboration with teachers, researchers, stakeholder and policymakers, the project supports the development of policy recommendations that promote play as a key element of high-quality ECEC and TPD.

1.4 Outputs

The outputs of the program as described below involve a sequence of interconnected actions, ranging from research to training, professional development, networking and policy recommendations.

MAPPING OF PLAY STATUS AND NEEDS

Desk and field research across partner countries to map the current play practices and identify challenges and needs of pre and in-service teachers and leaders.

TRAINING PACKAGE

Development of a comprehensive guide and training modules for ECEC teachers, providing practical strategies, pedagogical tools, and theoretical insights to effectively use play in early childhood curricula.

EDUPLAY LEARNING COMMUNITY

Establishment of a pan-European network and learnng community of ECEC stakeholders, researchers, practitioners and policymakers specialized and interested in the use of play in ECEC.

POLICY RECOMENDATIONS

Formulation of evidence-based policy recommendations to inform the educational systems and policy on systematizing the use of play in ECEC settings across Europe.

Chapter 2:
EDUPLAY Teacher's Guide to Play

2.1 Purpose of Teacher's Guide

The Teacher's Guide provides an academically grounded and needs-based resource that reflects the challenges and requirements identified through research carried out in five European countries within the field of ECEC. Developed collaboratively by academics and researchers, it offers a coherent framework that supports teachers in designing and reflecting on high-quality play experiences and is designed as a practical resource for both pre-service and in-service teachers, as well as for headteachers and directors. It brings together theoretical frameworks on play with examples of best practices and offers a range of pedagogical resources, including vignettes, infographics, reflective questions, and practical tools that support readers in strengthening their understanding of play-related concepts and reflecting on their own practice, while considering play implementation in their own educational settings. The Guide also serves as the pedagogical framework for the development and implementation of the e-learning courses provided through the EDUPLAY project.

2.2 Objectives of Teacher's Guide

Theoretical Understanding

- **Develop a deep understanding of play pedagogy** and consider its relevance to child development and learning.
- **Acknowledge the role of play** in fostering cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development for all children and makes connections with all content areas.

Pedagogical Competences

- **Design and implement play learning activities** that are developmentally appropriate and aligned with children's needs.
- **Apply theoretical concepts to classroom practice** by integrating play-based strategies across different content areas and age groups.
- **Use observation and documentation techniques to assess learning** through play and inform teachers' decisions.
- **Create inclusive and stimulating play learning environments** that support the learning of all children.

Reflective Practice

- **Develop a deep understanding of play pedagogy** and its relevance to child development and learning.
- **Continuously refine play practices** based on feedback, observation, and children's learning and development.

2.3 Benefits for ECEC Professionals

Benefits for all ECEC Professionals

- A deeper understanding of the key concepts of play pedagogy, grounded in a clear and coherent theoretical foundation of play.
- Connection between theory and practice, through concrete play examples, vignettes, and practical tools that support the meaningful integration of play into daily educational practice and promote children's holistic development.
- Support for differentiation and inclusion, enabling the creation of accessible and inclusive play experiences and environments for all children.
- Strengthening reflective practice and continuous professional learning.

Benefits by Professional Role

In-service teachers

- Development and enhancement of their own play skills, supporting the effective use of play as a pedagogical approach in everyday teaching practice.
- Development of core professional skills, such as designing play-rich learning environments, analysing children's play, and planning developmentally appropriate interactions in their classroom contexts.
- Enhanced observation and assessment skills, using tools and methods that facilitate systematic documentation of children's learning and inform pedagogical decision-making.
- Opportunities for reflection, supporting in-service teachers to evaluate their experiences, adapt their practices and continuously improve their pedagogical approaches.

Pre-service teachers

- Development and enhancement of their own play skills, supporting the effective use of play during initial teacher education and practicum experiences.
- Development of core pedagogical skills, including designing playrich learning environments, analysing children's play, and planning developmentally appropriate interactions in authentic learning settings.
- Enhanced observation and assessment skills, using tools and methods that facilitate systematic documentation of children's learning within practicum and training contexts.
- Opportunities for reflection, supporting pre-service teachers to evaluate their experiences, adapt their practices and continuously improve their pedagogical approaches.
- Development of play-pedagogy knowledge and dispositions for play effectiveness in learning.

Headteachers

- A shared pedagogical framework that promotes a common understanding of play pedagogy across the whole school community.
- Guidance for shaping schoolwide pedagogical practices, supporting the implementation of coherent, consistent, and evidence informed play-based approaches.
- Support and mentoring for teachers, through clear guidelines, examples of good practice, and practical tools that facilitate the effective and sustainable application of play pedagogy.

Chapter 3: Definitions of Key Concepts

3.1 Play definition

Play is a meaningful action/activity and/or a playful mindset during which a child is physically and/or mentally active and interacts with peers/adults and/or objects/materials or is alone, in exploring, imitating, creating, imagining and/or recreating an experience.

Play is based on children's needs and interests and should be respected as it is one of children's fundamental rights. All children have the right to play regardless of disability, ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic status.

Play literature agrees on common characteristics in defining play. These include (a) freedom of choice, (b) intrinsic motivation and active engagement, (c) an emphasis on the process over the product, and (d) the presence of make-believe. In the EDUPLAY project, we aim to define **inclusive play**, which considers all children regardless of their background or abilities. Achieving this may require reconceptualizing the above mentioned characteristics of play. In particular, inclusive play acknowledges children who: (a) require support from peers, adults, or materials, (b) benefit from a tangible product or outcome to remain engaged, (c) experience challenges in symbolic thinking, or (d) enjoy repetition and routine in their play. **Table 1** presents examples of potential factors that may limit children's engagement in play, along with practical strategies to support inclusive play and ensure that all children are considered from the outset.

Reasons that might restrict children's play development	Examples of practical suggestions
Children who do not try to play because they are afraid or shy to be in a team.	Plan play activities where children play with close peers or their teacher. Use multiple play spaces, for example where children can withdraw during play (e.g. use a tent to create a dress up play area).
Children who are afraid of failure.	Plan play/games with rules that lead to many or no winners. Plan team games so that winning or losing is a team experience.
Children with no prior experience.	Observe children's interests in terms of themes or toys and employ those in the different play areas. Use modelling to support gradual familiarization and autonomy.

Children who have developed advanced skills.	Plan many and varied play experiences to engage all children and offer different levels of challenge (e.g., use puzzles with 20-40-50-100 pieces). Plan team game experiences giving children the chance to cooperate and support each other.
Children whose attention is easily lost.	Plan play with simple rules, short duration, and reduce sensory overload. Participate in children's play to remind them of the rules and support them.

Table 1: Inclusive play considerations

Adapted from Λοΐζου, Ε. (2025).

These examples highlight both children's current and potential play skills, showing that each child engages in play within their own **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).** Teachers must consider them when planning play experiences and assessing children's learning and development.

At the castle play area, a child selects objects, such as a crown and a piece of fabric, which she wear as a cloak, and says that she is the king. The child declares the role without adding any other characteristics to it beyond the use of the objects. After observing the child's behavior, the teacher becomes involved in the play by taking on the role of the king's general and standing next to the child–king. Through her role, she reminds the king of different expressions or attitudes he could adopt; for example, when there was a problem with the dragon, she said, "My king, you seem worried and deep in thought" thus prompting the child to show that she is worried using facial and body expressions.

3.2 Developmental areas

We acknowledge the strong interconnection between learning and development through play, as play provides children with direct and indirect opportunities to learn and develop skills across all areas of development and content domains. We recognize that play enables children to develop holistically, while this development, in turn, enhances and enriches their play skills.

3.2.1 Cognitive development

There is a strong link between children's play and cognitive development. Through play, children actively construct knowledge rather than passively receiving it. Play supports the development of key cognitive skills, including problem-solving, metacognition, conceptual understanding, creative thinking, and pretend play.

For example, when a child suggests a scenario, assigns roles, and uses language to guide peers in play, they demonstrate problem-solving and higher-order thinking skills for are essential for development.

3.2.2 Socio-emotional development

Children's play is closely linked to socio-emotional development. Through play, children learn key social skills such as cooperation, sharing, turn-taking, and conflict resolution. Play also supports emotional growth by helping children express and regulate emotions, understand others' feelings, and develop empathy. These socioemotional skills are essential for children's present and future relationships.

For example during imaginative play the children discuss and share the roles they will enact in their play.

3.2.3 Motor development

During play, children develop motor skills by using objects and props and engaging in a range of actions and movements. Play provides opportunities to strengthen both fine and gross motor skills.

For example through dressing and undressing when taking on different roles or using the dice during a game with rules such as Snakes and Ladders.

3.3 Content areas and play

Different content areas offer children opportunities to develop skills that support play, while play within these areas allow children to learn and develop skills effectively and joyfully.

Mathematics e.g. a child counts the number of guests for the party and buys the corresponding number of desserts.

Music e.g. a child with his friends uses different musical instruments to prepare for a concert.

Language e.g. a child creates a dilemma in the scenario at the house area, that the kitchen is on fire!

Social Studies e.g. a child describes the actions of the baker at the play area of Baking.

Art e.g. a child creates the most beautiful butterfly wings which will surprise the witch.

Physical Education e.g. a child creates dance moves for the dancers who participate in a contest.

Science e.g. a child creates healthy drinks for the athletes, using coloring liquid and ice cubes.

3.4 Types of play

Children can engage in play across various contexts interacting with peers, adults, or objects, or playing alone while creating or recreating experiences. These contexts can relate to different types of play which enhance specific skills that help children progress toward more advanced forms of play. In several cases, different types of play can be observed interacting with one another and sharing common skills. Following we provide details of the most common types of play.

3.4.1 Object-oriented play

Object-oriented play refers to a play context in which children focus on exploring and/or manipulating objects and materials, discovering and using their properties and functions for their own sake. Examples include playing with sand or water, lining up toy cars, or repeatedly placing blocks into a container and emptying them again. This type of play is often considered one of children's earliest play experiences, as it allows them to explore materials and toys and begin to understand how these can later be used in other, more context-related forms of play.

3.4.2 Socio-dramatic play

Socio-dramatic play involves children role-playing everyday activities, interacting with peers, adults, using toys/objects, or playing alone to create and/or recreate life experiences (e.g. pretending to be a sister in a dollhouse playing with her brother).

Important elements to consider in socio-dramatic and imaginative play include the skills and abilities required to develop a specific role and create a scenario for enactment in any play environment. Attention to details such as facial expressions, voice, and posture are crucial for effective role development. Additionally, scenario development should include the key elements of a story—beginning, middle, and end—along with potential dilemmas to make the play engaging and meaningful.

3.4.3 Imaginative play

Imaginative or fantasy play involves children role-playing imaginative scenarios and roles, interacting with peers, adults, using toys/objects, or playing alone to create and/or recreate experiences from their imagination (e.g. pretending to be an angry witch on the Island of Butterflies).

3.4.4 Constructive play

Constructive or block play involves children actively building and reconstructing, either alone or with peers, adults, using toys/objects, to create realistic or imaginative experiences (e.g. using Legos to build a farmhouse). While the focus is on the construction process, pretend play can be incorporated into constructive play reaching mature levels of play.

Constructive play, often derived from block play, is guided by the actual skills children demonstrate during their play and is organized into specific developmental stages. These stages progress from simply piling blocks together, to lining them up, and then to creating bridges or more complex structures. Pretend play often emerges alongside this progression, reaching its most advanced stage as children combine construction with doll replicas and pretend scenarios.

3.4.5 Creative play

Creative play involves children actively creating, transforming, or experimenting with peers, adults, or objects/materials, either alone or collaboratively, often resulting in a realistic or imaginative product (e.g. making costumes for a stage performance, crafting butterfly wings, or creating sounds for a story). It is most meaningful when set in a context or scenario, such as children taking on roles in a bakery and inventing new baked goods using various materials.

Creative play is based on children's ability to experiment with materials and produce creations related to their play area or the theme being explored. A more advanced form of creative play occurs when children demonstrate flexibility in their ideas, as well as fluency and originality in their creations, reflecting a higher level of imagination and innovation.

3.4.6 Experimental play

Experimental play involves exploring, experimenting, and discovering concepts and ideas, while actively developing and strengthening scientific skills. It becomes especially meaningful when set in a context or a scenario, such as children taking on the role of botanists in a garden to explore and observe different flowers. There can be a direct connection with the content area of science.

3.4.7 Games with rules

Games with rules involve children actively participating in play by following the goals and rules of a specific game, either alone or with peers, adults, or toys/objects, (e.g., playing Snakes and Ladders).

Games with rules engage children in a range of socio-emotional and cognitive skills. Participation requires self-control, the ability to collaborate with others, and the capacity to follow agreed-upon rules. Additionally, children must use cognitive skills to plan their thinking, make decisions, and guide their actions throughout the game.

3.4.8 Outdoor play

Outdoor play involves the context of play during which the child is physically active outdoors and in nature, exploring, discovering or challenging themselves. In this kind of play children have freedom for big movements (e.g. running, jumping or climbing) and to be adventurous. It can also encompass other types of play that can occur in outdoor environments (e.g. play with sand and water, games with rules).

3.5 Ways of organizing play

In any way of organizing play, the goal is for the child to be actively engaged. The progress of play is determined either by the children's initiative, where they take the lead (child-initiated or free play), or by interaction between the teacher and children, collectively guiding the play (teacher-guided or structured play). Both modes of play can occur in any type of play, and a play activity may begin as free and transition into structured or the opposite.

In **free play**, or child-initiated play, children choose the type of play, their play partners, and how to use objects and materials within classroom rules. They initiate play and determine its course, while the teacher observes and supports as needed following the children's lead.

In **structured play**, or teacher-guided play, children may choose where and with whom to play, as play is initiated and guided by the teacher. During this way of organising play, children remain actively engaged and are encouraged to use specific objects, materials or toys in ways that help them connect with prior learning experiences or develop targeted skills within the areas of development or content areas mentioned above.

3.6 Teacher's Engagement in Play

Teachers need a specific set of teaching and play skills to effectively engage in children's play and support their learning and development. They enhance play and guide it toward more mature forms through observing children, planning activities, and reflecting on both, play and their own involvement. Teachers can take a **direct role**, guiding play with ideas and feedback, or an **indirect role**, following children's lead to support skill development. They may participate in role, actively engaging in scenarios, or out of role, facilitating and managing the environment, both equally important for children's play. In these interactions, teachers act as observers, co-players, directors, helpers, or facilitators/mediators, providing materials, guidance, and conflict resolution to ensure play is meaningful, engaging, and developmentally enriching. The ways teachers participate and the roles they assume depend on the goals they have for the children in each activity always respecting their needs and interests.

3.7 Dimensions of Play

Play is considered a multidimensional construct with several important dimensions. Each of these dimensions refers to a particular aspect of play as a learning experience. The role of the teacher as described above is crucial for promoting each of these dimensions. Following we discuss three dimensions:

3.7.1 Quality of play:

The quality of play refers to the richness of children's actions, the content of the play, and the materials/toys or objects used in play. It is considered from three perspectives: the child, the teacher, and the environment.

- From the child's perspective, the quality of play refers to the level of maturity demonstrated in their play. Mature play pertains to the advanced development of skills within each type of play, enabling children to engage fully in a play activity. This includes interacting effectively with peers, using materials and props appropriately, sustaining play over time, and exploring non-stereotypical ways of playing without adult assistance. The development of play can be influenced by children's skills and level of engagement. For example, children may remain engaged in a single scenario throughout a session, adapt and enhance their play, or choose to disengage and move on to another activity.

- Quality of play involvement also considered from the teacher's perspective. The teacher participates in children's play in the most appropriate ways responding to their needs and supporting their play development and learning. The type of feedback, encouragement and/or guidelines provided are important aspects of play's quality. Within this quality of play involvement acknowledges the interconnection between learning taking place during the content areas and play activities. Skills or concepts learned or developed from previous learning experiences/stimuli maybe incorporated into their play (e.g. After visiting the doctor's office, the child learns how to use a stethoscope and experiments with it during sociodramatic play to pretend to be a doctor).

- Quality of play from the environment perspective refers to the importance of effectively organizing the environment through space design, arrangement, and quality of materials/toys/objects to support all children's exploration, interaction, and participation in various types of play, promoting their development and learning. Space planning includes the setup of the classroom, such as play areas and open or closed spaces. The selection and arrangement of materials ensure that all children have access to sufficient, appropriate, and engaging toys and objects for their play.

3.7.2 Frequency of play

When evaluating the frequency of play, we consider two key indicators: frequency and duration. Frequency refers to how often play experiences are implemented, providing insight into the regularity of children's engagement in play throughout the day or week. Duration refers to the length of time each play activity lasts, which helps assess how sustained and immersive children's play experiences are.

3.7.3 Differentiation of play

Differentiation of play refers to the extent to which play activities and actions are adapted to meet the needs of all participants, rather than being implemented in the same way for everyone. This may involve variations in play content, process, or product to accommodate different groups of children. Tailoring play to the specific needs of each child, teacher, or preschool setting enhances its successful implementation and maximizes its impact on learning and development. This dimension is closely linked to equity, ensuring that all children have opportunities to engage in meaningful play, helping to reduce learning gaps, and supporting the development of every child.

Chapter 4:
Play Thematic Areas

Authors: Bredikyte, M., and Brandisauskiene, A.

4.1 Theoretical Origins of Play Pedagogy

Objectives

1. Enhance an understanding of play as a leading activity during the preschool years
2. Explore the theoretical foundations of cultural-historical, sociocultural, and constructivist approaches to children's play
3. Integrate theoretical ideas with progressive education and play pedagogy
4. Formulate a contemporary perspective of ECEC, in which play is understood as a culturally, socially, and pedagogically mediated activity that promotes the development and learning of young children

Play pedagogy refers to educational approaches that conceptualize play not as a supplementary or recreational activity but as **a central mode of children's learning, development, and participation in culture**. Across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, multiple theoretical traditions have converged on the idea that play is a qualitatively distinctive form of activity with unique developmental potential. Among these, conceptualize play not as a supplementary or recreational activity but **as a central mode of children's learning, development, and participation in culture** have been particularly influential. In parallel, major early childhood pedagogical systems, **Fröbel, Waldorf/ Steiner**, and **Reggio Emilia** have contributed influential **play practices** (materials, environments, teacher roles) that operationalize these theories into educational designs and everyday teaching.

Together, these perspectives **frame play** as a **developmentally generative, socially mediated, and pedagogically designable activity.**

Cultural-Historical and Sociocultural Foundations of Play

The following paragraphs will briefly present the main theoretical ideas that have shaped the contemporary conception of play pedagogy.

The cultural-historical and sociocultural psychology of **Lev Vygotsky** provides one of the most influential theoretical foundations for play pedagogy. In contrast to views that treat play as a reflection of development, Vygotsky (1933/1967) argued that **play is a leading activity** in the preschool period that is, a form of activity through which new psychological formations emerge.

A central contribution of Vygotsky's theory is the idea that in mature pretend play, children act within an **imaginary situation governed by rules**. This creates a paradoxical structure: children experience freedom through imagination while simultaneously submitting to role based constraints. Vygotsky argued that this structure enables children to practice **self regulation, voluntary attention, and intentional behavior**, often at levels exceeding those observable in non-play contexts (Vygotsky, 1978).

At this point, Vygotsky introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This is perhaps the best-known, yet often oversimplified, concept in education.

> *"play creates the zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. […] in play it is as though the child is trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour." (Vygotsky, 2016, 18)*

For Vygotsky, the ZPD arises when the child voluntarily submits to role-based rules within an imaginary situation, thereby achieving a level of self-regulation and conscious control that exceeds everyday behaviour without direct adult instruction. The ZPD in play differs qualitatively from the ZPD in instruction. In play, development is generated by the child's voluntary submission to role-based rules within an imaginary situation, whereas in instruction the ZPD emerges through adult-led instruction and **structured task facilitation. In play, the structure of play itself reorganizes motivation, behavior, and consciousness**. **Table 1** illustrates these details in ZPD.

Criteria for comparison	ZPD IN PLAY	ZPD IN INSTRUCTION
Source of development:	Imaginary situation and role-based rules	Adult through the structured task and instruction
ZPD creator:	Play activity through play structure	The adult through teaching
Form of regulation:	Voluntary, internal self-regulation	External regulation (internalization)
Motivation:	Intrinsic (meaningful roles, motives)	Often extrinsic or task-oriented
Key mechanism:	Acting according to meaning rather than immediate perception	Acting with structured assistance
Rules:	Implicit, embedded in roles	Explicit, task-based
Role of adult:	Optional; may enrich or sustain play	Necessary for task completion
Developmental outcome:	Emergence of voluntary behaviour and other higher mental functions	Acquisition of specific skills and/or knowledge
Vygotskian status:	Leading activity of preschool age	Important but secondary

Table 1. Two forms of ZPD in early childhood development

In play, the child stretches themselves by stepping into a role while in instruction, the child stretches with the guidance of an adult or peer. Both play and instruction create ZPDs. Play leads development in early childhood by reorganizing motivation and self-regulation; instruction supports development by building specific skills and knowledge. Effective practice recognizes when to teach and when to protect play.

Play also provides a privileged context for the development of higher psychological functions through **mediation**. Language, symbols, and culturally meaningful roles are appropriated in play and gradually internalized. Thus, play is not an individual fantasy activity but a **socially and culturally structured form of participation.**

Play as a cultural context for development mediated through:

- Language
- Symbols
- Culturally meaningful roles

Play as an inclusive activity. From a Vygotskian perspective, imaginative play is not an ability test, but rather a developmental context. The question is not "Can this child play?" but "What forms of mediation allow this child to participate in play as a social and cultural activity?" **Play is one of the means** through which all children, including those with disabilities, **develop**. According to Vygotsky, differing needs **create a social situation of development**, and difficulties arise when cultural tools and social practices are inaccessible. In such cases, **development should proceed** through **alternative pathways**. From a Vygotskian perspective, inclusive imaginative play means reorganizing roles, rules, and mediation so that all children, regardless of ability, can participate in shared cultural meaning-making and develop through play.

Henri Wallon: Emotion, Movement, and Social Development in Play.

Henri Wallon (1879–1962) offers an important complementary perspective often overlooked in Anglo American play theory. Wallon emphasized the **primacy of emotion, movement, and social interaction** in development, arguing that cognition emerges from affective and motor processes (Wallon, 1941/1983). From a Wallonian perspective, play is a **whole body, emotional, and relational activity**, not merely a cognitive one. His theory undoubtedly influenced the cultural-historical emphasis on play as a social phenomenon. It added depth to play pedagogy by highlighting emotional engagement and embodiment, which are key aspects of pretend and narrative play.

Reflective Questions

Where in your practice do play-based ZPDs and instructional ZPDs connect and where do they risk being confused or substituted for one another?

Explain why play is important for the development and learning of pre school children?

Elkonin's Cultural-Historical Psychology of Role Play.

Building on Vygotsky, **Daniil Elkonin** developed a detailed cultural-historical theory of play that remains foundational for contemporary play pedagogy. Following Vygotsky's ideas, Elkonin (1978/2005) also argued that play is a cultural activity embedded in and stemming from the surrounding society, cultural environment, and historical time. He conceptualized role play as a historically evolved activity through which children master **social relations rather than objects.** According to Elkonin, the central unit of pretend play is not action itself but the **role**, which organizes rules, motives, and interactions.

Elkonin's analysis of play structure—role, rule, and action—demonstrated how play supports the internalization of social norms and the emergence of self-regulation. Importantly, Elkonin emphasized that the quality of play depends on children's access to **socially meaningful roles** and opportunities for collective coordination. This insight has direct pedagogical implications: improving play is not primarily about adding toys but about **supporting social imagination and role relations.**

Adult Participation and Play Tutoring

Scholars worldwide have extended Vygotsky's ideas by elaborating on how learning occurs through **joint play activity of children and adults.** Within this framework, play pedagogy is understood as a continuum ranging from child-initiated free play to adults stepping "inside play" and becoming co-players who enrich play without undermining children's agency. The opposite movement also occurs from adult-initiated and sensitively guided co-play to children taking over the activity, developing it further, and playing freely without adult participation.

Criteria
1. motivating shared theme;
2. active 'in role' participation;
3. emotional involvement;
4. dialogic character of interactions;
5. dramatic tension in play script;
6. coherent and fascinating script;
7. elaboration of the 'critical' turns in play. (Bredikyte, 2011)

Table 2: Criteria of a successful adult intervention into children's play activity.

Bruner's concept of **scaffolding** provides a theoretical rationale for adult involvement in play when such involvement expands children's narrative complexity, symbolic resources, or social coordination (Bruner et al., 1976). Rather than directing outcomes, adults participate as co-players, narrators, or role partners. Contemporary sociocultural play research emphasizes **narrative and dialogue** as mediational means. Shared imaginary frames, referred to as "playworlds" (Lindqvist, 1995) and "narrative play" allow children and adults t co-construct sustained narratives that support motivation, emotional engagement, and self-regulation (Hakkarainen et al., 2013). This work demonstrates that play pedagogy can be intentionally designed while preserving play's intrinsic logic. Adults support play best by protecting it, enriching it, and not over-directing it **(See Table 2)**.

Marilyn Fleer expanded cultural-historical theory by emphasizing **conceptual play** and the integration of scientific concepts into play without collapsing its imaginary nature (Fleer, 2014). Fleer's work on **conceptual play** demonstrates that scientific and cultural concepts can be embedded into play when they serve the narrative logic of children's activity. Empirical studies show that such approach support early conceptual development while maintaining children's motivation and agency. Fleer emphasizes that learning concepts must operate in the service of play, rather than subordinating play to curriculum outcomes.

Watch Professor M. Fleer explains what a Playworld is.
https://youtu.be/WT4_Zgpw5_8?si=KXuj5nbAmT2uGfK6

Constructivist Perspectives: Piaget and Symbolic Play

From a constructivist standpoint, Jean Piaget conceptualized play primarily as a mode of **assimilation**, through which children incorporate experience into existing cognitive structures (Piaget, 1951/2013). Play reflects the child's current developmental level and supports the consolidation of mental schemas. Piaget identified symbolic play as a key marker of representational thinking. In this view, play does not lead development but **expresses and stabilizes it**. Many early childhood curricula influenced by constructivism emphasize exploration, manipulatives, and discovery learning, as children construct knowledge through active engagement. While constructivist theory has been criticizedfor underemphasizing social mediation, it contributed enduring insights into **children's agency**, the importance of hands-on activity, and the role of symbolic transformation, all central to contemporary play pedagogy incorporating theoretical perspectives and play based practices. **Table 3** provides a comparison of cultural-historical and constructivist approaches.

Table 3. Comparison of stages of play development as described in the **Vygotskian** and **Piagetian** approaches.

STAGES OF PLAY DEVELOPMENT	
VYGOTSKIAN: Cultural-historical approach	**PIAGETIAN:** Constructivist approach
Stage 1. Object-oriented and imitative activity (precondition for play) (approx. 1–3 years) • Manipulation of objects and imitation of adult actions. • Actions tied to **real objects and real meanings** • No sustained imaginary situation yet. **Key developmental shift:** appropriation of cultural actions and meanings.	**Stage 1. Practice play (sensorimotor play) (approx. 0–2 years)** • Repetition of actions for pleasure (e.g. shaking, banging, running). • No symbolic meaning. • Closely linked to sensorimotor intelligence. **Function:** exercise and consolidation of motor and perceptual schemas.
Stage 2. Early pretend play (emergence of imaginary situation) (approx. 3–4 years) • Begin to separate **meaning from object** (e.g., a block becomes a car). • Simple imaginary situations appear. • Roles are unstable and short-lived. • Rules exist implicitly but are not yet consciously followed. **Key developmental shift:** The child begins to act according to meaning, not immediate perception.	**Stage 2. Symbolic play (pretend play) (approx. 2–6 years)** • Objects and actions represent something else (a stick becomes a horse). • Play reflects internal mental representations. • Egocentric and individual play is common. • Social interaction is possible but not central. **Function:** assimilation of reality to the child's existing cognitive structures.

Stage 3. Mature role play / sociodramatic play (leading activity) (approx. 4–6/7 years)

- Play organised around:
  - o **Roles**
  - o **Rules** derived from social relations
  - o **Shared imaginary situation.**
- Voluntarily subordinate their behaviour to the role (e.g. Doctors don't cry).

Key developmental shift:

- o self-regulation,
- o voluntary attention,
- o imagination,
- o social understanding.

Stage 3. Games with rules (approx. 6–7+ years)

- Children accept externally imposed rules.
- Rules are understood as fixed and shared.
- Social cooperation becomes more important.

Function: logical thinking and moral development.

Stage 4. Games with explicit rules (transition to learning activity) (approx. 6–7+ years)

- Board games, sports, rule-based games.
- Rules are **explicit, external, and stable.**
- Marks the transition from play as leading activity to learning activity.

Key developmental shift: Transitioning to learning activity

Vygotsky's and Piaget's conceptualizations of play highlight their underlying theoretical differences. From a Vygotskian perspective, play leads development, actively promoting the emergence of new abilities. In contrast, Piaget regards play as a reflection of the child's current developmental stage, expressing already established cognitive structures. Vygotsky situates play within a social and cultural context, emphasizing its rule-based nature and the importance of social interaction, whereas Piaget frames play primarily as an individual and cognitive activity. Imagination, for Vygotsky, is central and transformative, enabling children to move beyond immediate reality; for Piaget, it functions mainly as symbolic representation of existing knowledge. Rules in Vygotsky's account are initially embedded implicitly within social roles and later become explicit, while Piaget associates explicit rules chiefly with games. These differences are reflected in their respective developmental outcomes where Vygotsky links play to the development of self-regulation and higher mental functions, while Piaget sees it as contributing to the consolidation of cognitive structures.

TIPS FOR PRACTICE

From a Vygotskian perspective, teachers should:	**From a Piagetian perspective, teachers should:**
Support mature role play	Provide rich environments for exploration
Participate as co-players	Respect developmental readiness
Enrich play narratives and roles	Observe play as a window into thinking
See play as a pedagogical responsibility	

In one sentence…

Contemporary play pedagogy often **integrates both perspectives**, while giving priority to the Vygotskian insight that **high-quality pretend play can actively drive development**, especially self-regulation and learning readiness.

Play Pedagogy and Progressive Education

Fröbel and the Pedagogization of Play

Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852), the founder of the kindergarten, was among the first to institutionalize play as an educational principle. Fröbel viewed play as the highest expression of human development in early childhood and designed structured materials ("gifts" and "occupations") to support learning through play (Fröbel, 1826/1887).

Fröbel's legacy lies in his conviction that **educational environments can be intentionally designed to invite play-based learning**, an idea that continues to shape early childhood pedagogy.

Waldorf Education: Play, Imagination, Imitation, and Rhythm

Waldorf education, inspired by **Rudolf Steiner** (1861-1925), emphasizes imaginative free play, imitation, and rhythm as central to early development. While grounded in anthroposophical philosophy rather than mainstream psychology, Waldorf practice highlights the pedagogical value of **unhurried, open-ended play** and the adult's role as a moral and aesthetic model.

Dewey and Progressive Education: Play as a form of Experiential Inquiry

John Dewey's (1859-1952) progressive education philosophy provides an important theoretical bridge between constructivist, sociocultural, and major early childhood pedagogical systems. Dewey did not develop a specific theory of play, but his concept of **learning through experience and inquiry** strongly supports play pedagogy. According to Dewey, play is a form of experiential inquiry through which children construct meaning, engage in social activities, and develop intellectually and morally. Dewey (1938) argued that education should grow from children's interests and lived experiences, emphasizing active participation, problem solving, and democratic relationships. From a Deweyan perspective, play is a form of **meaningful experience** that integrates emotion, action, and thought. This view resonates strongly with Reggio Emilia's emphasis on projects, inquiry, and children as active meaning-makers.

Reggio Emilia: Sociocultural and Progressive Convergences

The **Reggio Emilia approach**, shaped by **Loris Malaguzzi** (1920-1994), synthesizes sociocultural, progressive, and constructivist ideas. Reggio pedagogy is grounded in an image of the child as competent, relational, and expressive, capable of constructing knowledge through interaction with others and the environment (Edwards et al., 2012). Play and inquiry are intertwined in Reggio practice. Teachers act as co-researchers, while the environment functions as a "third teacher," providing material and symbolic resources for exploration.

In the Reggio Emilia approach, play is not allocated a specific amount of time; it is a way of thinking, exploring, and learning that permeates the entire day. Documentation serves as a reflective tool, supporting dialogue and shared meaning making. These principles align closely with sociocultural views of learning as mediated participation. The three influential early childhood pedagogical systems—Fröbel, Waldorf/Steiner, and Reggio Emilia—were chosen because they conceptualize play and play-based inquiry as a central mode of children's learning, development, and participation in culture, rather than as a supplementary or recreational activity. These systems have strongly contributed to contemporary play practices that incorporate play activity into educational designs and everyday teaching.

Key Takeaways:

1. The theoretical origins of play pedagogy lie in a dialogue between cultural-historical, sociocultural, constructivist, and progressive educational traditions
2. Across these perspectives, play is understood as a developmentally powerful, socially mediated, and pedagogically designable activity
3. Contemporary play pedagogy highlights how adults can intentionally support play without instrumentalizing it—preserving imagination, agency, and social meaning as the core of early childhood education

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4.2 Development and Play

Objectives

1. Understand that early childhood development is holistic
2. Recognize how children explore their world through different types of play
3. Identify key developmental domains and processes related to play
4. Spot opportunities to foster the development of play and specific developments within play

Development in early childhood

Early childhood development is often described as a multidimensional and dynamic process involving several interrelated domains: physical and motor, socio-emotional, and cognitive. Motor development includes sensorimotor development and both fine and gross motor skills. Socio-emotional development involves self-awareness, autonomy, emotional regulation, and the ability to form relationships. Cognitive development covers thinking, language, attention, memory, and imagination.

Although these domains can be distinguished conceptually, they do not develop in isolation. Instead, developmental domains are interdependent which means that they are functionally integrated and continuously influence one another. For example, increasing motor control enables children to explore objects and spaces more independently, which supports learning and self-confidence. Feeling emotionally secure with an adult encourages curiosity and interaction with the environment, strengthening both emotional and cognitive development. Everyday behaviours such as communicating, playing or moving through space, involve the coordination and integration of physical, social emotional, and cognitive abilities. Distinguishing between these developmental areas can support ECEC teachers in observing and interpreting children's experiences, although in practice, teachers need to approach children 'as a whole' and children's development as holistic.

During play, children act and interact with their heart, hands and head. They simultaneously draw on physical, socio-emotional, and cognitive skills, but their motive in play is to belong to and make meaning of their social-cultural environment.

This means that play is not merely a tool for fostering cognitive, physical, or socio-emotional skills. Play is primarily a source of wellbeing, engagement, and enjoyment, reflecting each child's right to play as a fundamental element of their lived experience.

Factors Related to Play and Development

Children's play, as part of their overall development, is shaped by a continuous and dynamic interaction between biological and environmental factors, with experience playing a central role. Children develop through repeated and sustained meaningful interactions with their environment, which help to build memory, internalize skills, and tackle more complex challenges. These experiences are never neutral: they carry emotional value and become part of children's potential that may guide their future thinking and behavior.

Social relationships are particularly influential. Secure, responsive interactions with caregivers encourage exploration, imitation, and language development. Adults can support development by creating shared attention, encouraging children's initiatives, and connecting new learning to prior experiences of children. Because children bring different "funds of knowledge" from their families and communities, developmental paths vary. Children with additional educational needs may develop at a different pace or require adapted experiences and additional support for inclusive play. Development thus emerges from the dynamic interaction between children's innate characteristics and the quality, diversity and consistency of experiences within a supportive environment.

Play as development and learning

Children naturally explore and make sense of the world through play. In early infancy, this "world" is initially and primarily experienced through their own feelings, sensory experiences and responsive interaction with caregivers. These interactions are key proximal processes that organize and expand the early understanding of their environment. In **emotional contact play**, children and caregivers are physically close, make eye contact, and mirror each other's facial expressions and sounds. Caregivers help children regulate their emotions by offering comfort and a secure environment. Through these interactions, children learn to make contact and take turns, which forms the foundation for later verbal interaction. At the same time, children's senses develop, and they become increasingly aware of how things look, sound, smell, and feel. Emotional contact play is closely related to secure attachment, meaning that children experience their caregiver(s) as both a safe haven in times of distress and a secure base from which they feel comfortable to autonomously explore their environment.

From a theoretical perspective, this early form of play can be understood as a **leading activity** in the early years (El'konin), meaning that emotional communication with adults plays a central role in learning and development in infancy. Secure attachment, sensory development, and increasing motor control together provide children with a strong foundation for exploring their physical environment. In practice, this means that responsive caregiving, close interaction, and shared attention are not only supportive, but essential conditions for children's exploration and learning, not only during infancy, but also during childhood in general.

As children's motor skills and perceptual abilities develop, play increasingly involves observing and manipulating objects and materials. Children explore the properties and affordances of objects — both cultural and natural — and experiment with using them. At the same time, children explore their environment with their bodies, discovering how they can move through space across different surfaces and at varying speeds. According to Vygotsky, children's development during this phase is mediated by the use of cultural tools such as language and shared activities during **social interaction** during which children appropriate this cultural knowledge through **imitation and gradual internalization**. Adults can support this process by modelling actions, naming objects and actions the child is interested in, and inviting children to participate, without conditioning or interfering with the child's play. During this period, children's vocabulary expands rapidly.

Play as human characteristic

In Homo Ludens, Johan Huizinga argued that play is not a childish or trivial activity, but a **fundamental characteristic of being human**. He described play as voluntary, meaningful, and governed by self-chosen rules, through which people create shared meanings and social connections.

Huizinga's perspective shows that play does not disappear with age, but **changes in form and function** across the lifespan. From children's play to adult activities such as sports, art, and rituals, play remains a central way in which humans explore possibilities and make sense of the world.

For education, this view invites teachers to see play not as preparation for "real" learning, but as a **serious mode of learning and participation** that deserves time, space, and professional support.

Over time, children's play typically develops from parallel and associative play forms into increasingly complex cooperative play. This developmental shift is related to improvements in emotional regulation, language and communication skills, social understanding and the emergence of early friendships.

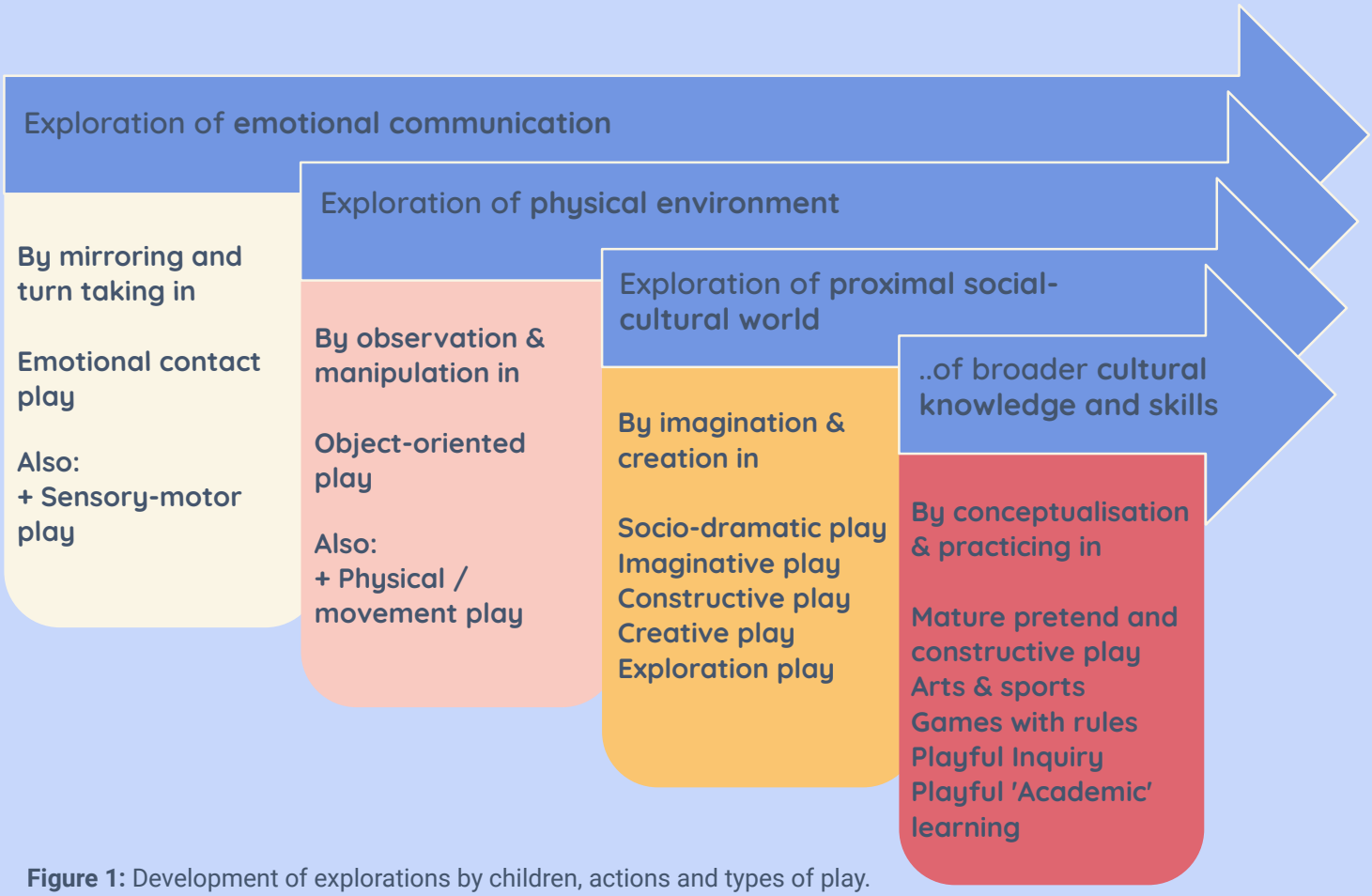

Figure 1: Development of explorations by children, actions and types of play.

As children develop, an increasing variety of play forms becomes available. Earlier forms of play do not disappear, but they become less prominent. For example, school-aged children may still enjoy simple imitation games, and adults may engage in object-oriented play when exploring a new mobile phone or playing with sand while sitting on the beach.

Connections between types of play and developmental domains

The development of play, as illustrated in **Figure 1**, reflects the holistic development of the child. In order to play, children need different skills and knowledge. And through play, children gain a range of new experiences that are related to different developmental domains. What are more specific relations between different types of play and different developmental domains between the ages of 3 and 6 years?

In **OBJECT-ORIENTED PLAY** children explore the physical environment of objects and materials. Object-oriented play starts with the sensorimotor exploration of the objects or materials, then develops into physical manipulation, where the child is either focused on manipulating according to the cultural function of the objects and materials or on arranging them in a specific manner, for example by function, or in an esthetic way, such as a pattern. Once symbolic thought develops, so does object-oriented play develop into the mental manipulation of objects where a cup can become a hat. Object-oriented play gradually evolves into other activities or play types such as constructive play-block play, creative play, and pretend play. Different types or 'levels' of play co-exist, depending on the familiarity of the child with the objects or materials. New, unfamiliar objects initially lead to object-oriented play.

Rolling clay balls

A child plays with clay. She forms small balls with her hands. Every time a ball is finished, she puts it next to another ball, which creates a row of balls, that increases in length.

The child in this example experiences the **properties of clay**, practices **fine motor skills** in shaping the balls, might observe that they differ in size, arranges objects in a line, which is at the same time **spatial orientation**, experience of differences in length, a way to arrange **quantities** and perhaps **sense for aesthetics**. Finally, the child experiences **sustained focus** and may feel **self-confidence.**

Whilst engaged in object-oriented play children use and develop their fine motor skills while handling and manipulating the object or materials. They also call upon their spatial relational skills, for example when they try to stack objects on top of each other. Object oriented play is also a fertile context for the early development of language. For example, it provides a context for meaningful (verbal) interactions, shared attention and communicative exchanges through gestures or verbalizations. Engaging in object oriented play also promotes gestures, such as pointing, in children as they try to communicate to others concerning the object or material. Moreover, the inherent multimodal experiences (feeling, touching, centering, or experiencing the objects otherwise) during object-oriented play make it a perfect context for the provision of vocabulary input by more knowledgeable others.

As a teacher it is easy to underestimate object-oriented play, as the developmental value of it is not often recognized in practice or teachers focus on stimulating more advanced play. This type of play, however, is a strong fundament for more advanced play types and it needs time and attention. It is important that teachers facilitate and stimulate the exploration of objects and materials, support observation, arranging objects and practicing with using objects.

Reflective Questions

If you take the perspective of a child that is new to the world, which objects in your classroom would arouse your curiosity? And how would you start your exploration?

How do you see object-oriented play being employed in your classroom? How could you stimulate this type of play?

During **PRETEND PLAY** children explore human practices by acting "as if" a situation is real. They reenact everyday activities or cultural practices (**socio-dramatic play**), or they explore fictional themes and characters (**imaginative play**).

Although this image of pretend play is common, pretend play does not begin with role enactment. Its origins lie in object-oriented play, in which children explore the cultural functions of objects and imitate how adults use them. For example, while exploring a cup, a child may pretend to drink from it. Children may also attribute actions or properties to toys or inanimate objects, such as making engine sounds while playing with toy cars, making a figurine walk or fly, or producing crying sounds for a doll.

In these early stages of pretend play, children are primarily fascinated by actions with objects. A child might place toy cakes in a toy oven and almost immediately take them out again, repeating the action several times, or leave the cakes on the floor, unlike a real baker would. Gradually, children begin to connect social roles to their actions and start to enact these roles, also using role language. At this stage, children derive most pleasure from role-taking and begin to play simple scripts in interaction with other children. Children choose the objects that belong to their roles in order to perform the actions and scripts they create. If suitable objects are not available, they may create them or use object substitution, where one object stands for another to serve as play attribute. For example, a bucket may become a cauldron and a stick a spoon, or a chair and a flat round object together represent a complete car. These objects can be endowed with additional imagined qualities: the cauldron may be filled with bubbling magic potion, or the car may turn into a racing car that drives very fast to another country. Also, objects may be imagined entirely. When playing together, children mutually acknowledge the pretend situations and the meanings attributed to objects.

As pretend play becomes more complex, play scripts grow longer and become more elaborate, which affects both the complexity of language and the level of cooperation. Children engage in pretend-related metacommunication, developing the ability to discuss rules, negotiate roles, and reflect on the ongoing pretend play.

TIPS FOR PRACTICE

Guided activities to support play narratives

Guided activities can support children in building richer play narratives. Examples include reading a (picture) book related to the classroom theme, visiting a local bakery, having a conversation about getting lost, or watching a short video about house construction together. By talking with children about these shared experiences, they expand their understanding of the world. For example, a teacher might say: "Now that we have watched the video about building houses, I'm wondering how we can build our own house in the construction area."

Through such conversations:

1. Children learn to use language both as a means of communication and as a tool for thinking. A teacher might prompt further reflection by saying: "In the video, we saw that there are different roles involved in building a house. We saw an architect and a contractor—what other roles did we notice?"
2. These shared thinking-and-talking moments provide a bridge to play activities. Children encounter new vocabulary, actively participate in meaning making, and, through talking and thinking together, build new knowledge about the world. As a result, their play is enriched which gives a strong developmental impulse.

CONSTRUCTIVE PLAY and **BLOCK PLAY** develop from object-oriented play, in which children explore and manipulate materials. At first, the focus is on experimenting how materials fit together; gradually children begin to create products more purposefully, and constructions become increasingly specific and complex.

Stacking blocks, balancing, and connecting constructions stimulate children's **fine motor skills, spatial awareness, and spatial reasoning.** Children learn to estimate size, shape, and proportion, control their balance and movements, and acquire **mathematical concepts and vocabulary** such as big, small, wide, narrow, high, low, more, and less.

Constructive play provides rich opportunities for **language and cognitive development**, for example when children are invited to name what they are making, articulate their plan, and reflect on how a construction was achieved.

When children are supported to think ahead, devise plans, and adapt these when something does not work, construction play contributes to the development of **self regulation, including planning, problem-solving, self-regulation, perseverance, emotion regulation, and reflection.** Playing and building together also supports socio emotional development, as children **collaborate, negotiate, and resolve disagreements**. The ECEC professionals play an important role in supporting these processes. During building, they can introduce relevant vocabulary and concepts and ask open-ended questions that focus on the building process, thereby stimulating children's reasoning.

TIPS FOR PRACTICE

Guiding activity to support schematizing in constructive play

By guiding constructive play, teachers can provide children with additional cognitive challenges in the area of **schematizing**. This involves translating ideas or constructions into a visual form, such as a drawing of a self-built structure. The teacher can invite the child to **capture their construction on paper** by encouraging careful observation, use of symbols, and attention to spatial relationships.

Through this activity the child explores the world of **symbols and signs**. They learn to observe carefully: Which parts should appear in front? How many blocks need to be drawn? How do I represent the top or the back? This process strengthens **spatial reasoning**, enhances **language development** through mathematical concepts such as above, below, high, how many, first...then, and allows children to experience that a construction can be **preserved in a representation and rebuilt later.**

Importantly, the child also learns that the representation is **not the object itself**, but refers to it, establishing an early understanding of **symbolic thinking** and abstract representation.

CREATIVE PLAY begins with the **sensorimotor exploration** and the (aesthetic) arrangement of objects and materials during object-oriented play. It develops into creative play when children start to use and arrange objects and materials to express themselves and create something, either spontaneously as the process unfolds or according to a pre devised plan. When children enrich their creative play with self-made materials, movements, or sounds, multiple developmental domains are activated. In particular creative and motor development are stimulated. The child uses creativity and imagination to shape ideas.

"Fluttering butterflies" – Connection with several areas of development

While playing outside, a group of children discover butterflies among the flowers in the playground. Together with the teacher, they observe how the butterflies move, where they land and what is striking about their wings. The teacher invites the children to tell what they see and invites them to look closely. The children then run across the playground with their arms outstretched, imitating the butterflies.

In the classroom, the teacher lays out all kinds of craft materials on a table: paper, ribbons, fabric, elastic and markers. The children are invited to make wings, "so you can pretend you're a butterfly yourself". Each child designs the wings in their own way. When the wings are finished, the children put them on. They move around the classroom. They flutter, turn, land and take off again. The classroom is transformed into a butterfly garden where play, movement and imagination come together.

Young children process their real-life experiences through play and imagination. The observation of butterflies outside is continued and deepened indoors. The activity relates to several areas of development at the same time:

• **Motor development:** By fluttering, running, turning and consciously using their bodies, children practise their gross motor skills, coordination and body awareness. They experience space, speed and direction and adjust their movements to what they see and feel.

• **Social-emotional development:** In this joint play, children adopt each other's ideas, watch each other and play together in a shared imaginative world. They experience pleasure, dare to show themselves and feel part of the group.

• **Cognitive development:** By imitating the butterfly, children deepen their understanding of nature. They think about how a butterfly moves and what wings do.

• **Creative and symbolic development:** By crafting wings and pretending to be butterflies children use symbols: a homemade object takes on new meaning. They experience that they can use materials, movement and imagination to represent something that is not literally there.

• **Language development:** Children describe the butterflies and discuss why they flutter and how the wings became ragged. Words such as flutter, land, wings, delicate and ragged, take on meaning because they are linked to concrete experiences.

OUTDOOR PLAY brings specific play opportunities for children. The outdoor space literally offers more space, allowing children to run, climb, balance and jump. All these activities contribute to gross motor skills, spatial awareness, strength, endurance and coordination. In addition, children find natural materials outdoors such as sand, water, sticks, leaves and stones, which invite object-oriented play, creative play, imaginative play and pretend play. Children can give these objects their own meaning. They are actively engaged in problem-solving thinking, creativity and exploration.

A nature-rich outdoor space also contributes to language and cognitive development. Nature provides **rich concepts** such as growing and blooming, living and dying, or words about how you move yourself. Additionally, concepts related to the weather are addressed, such as storms and thunderstorms, cold and heat, and sun and shade. **Giving new meaning to objects** from nature "This stick is my sword" encourages **negotiation of meaning** and active language use. Language is inextricably linked to **children's bodies and experiences**, which is what makes playing in a nature-rich outdoor space so valuable.

A special type of play is constituted by **GAMES WITH RULES.** Young children often like to play (simple) board games with peers and adults or (outdoor) games as hide and seek or tag games. Children also invent games themselves with self-made rules. Children can also play rule-based games alone, responding to the goals of the game (e.g. playing the game of Snakes and Ladders).

Games with rules relate to several developmental domains. Following and negotiating rules requires children to exercise **self-regulation and executive functions**, such as impulse control, attention, and working memory. Socially, children learn to cooperate, take turns, and consider others' perspectives, while emotionally they practice managing frustration, excitement, and disappointment. Games also provide a context for **moral development,** as children explore fairness, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. In addition, such play often involves **language development,** as rules are explained, discussed, and adjusted, and may engage **cognitive skills** such as planning, remembering sequences, and problem-solving. In games with rules, these domains are interconnected in a meaningful and motivating context.

"Red light - Green light" – Playful development of several skills

During the game Red light – Green light, the children are actively engaged while also showing strong concentration. One child stands with their back to the group and calls out "Green light," while the other children slowly creep closer. When the caller turns around and calls out loud "Red light", the players freeze like statues. Any child who is still moving has to return to the starting line.
The children run, sneak, laugh, and try their very best to stay completely still. They carefully watch one another and listen closely to know when they are allowed to move and when they must stop. The game creates a sense of excitement, enjoyment, and shared involvement.

Through this simple game, children develop motor, cognitive, emotional and social skills in a playful and meaningful way.

- **Self-regulation and executive functions** – controlling movement and impulses.
- **Listening and observation skills** – responding to verbal cues and visual signals.
- **Motor development** – running, stopping, balancing.
- **Socio-emotional and moral development** – turn-taking and coping with winning and losing.
- **Confidence and enjoyment in play** – participating actively and with enthusiasm.

Play connects different aspects of development

Play is a context in which different developmental domains can cascade into one another. Development in one domain creates new possibilities in others: emerging motor skills open up new ways of exploring objects, advances in cognitive and perceptual abilities enable more differentiated action, the emergence of symbolic thought opens up new opportunities for imaginative play that in turn requires certain language skills, and growing language and socio-emotional skills support shared meaning-making and coordination. Within play, these developments do not unfold in isolation but mutually reinforce each other over time. Play thus provides a dynamic context in which developmental changes occur, interact, and give rise to increasingly complex forms of activity. In short, play connects different developments; and different developments are visible in play. In the table below, some key developments are described, including tips for your own practice to stimulate these developments in play.

Key developmental domains in play from ages 3 to 6

TIPS FOR PRACTICE

Socio-emotional development	
Key developments	**Tips for practice**
Self-regulation of emotions	Make play a safe space to explore emotions: Read or tell stories to children that involve emotions, to inspire their pretend play. Or Co-construct play stories with children that involve emotions (the fire-brigade driving towards a fire, a nurse taking care of others, a wolf strolling in the forest). Let children control the intensity of their emotions and be a safe haven. Label emotions that occur in (any type of) play, like disappointment, pride, anger or fulfillment.
Self-regulation of behaviour	Invite children to show and tell their plans for play. What would they like to play, and how? What is going to happen? What do they need? Support children to reflect on their experiences during play time. Tell us, what did you play? What happened? How did you solve that problem?
Peer relations	Give children time to play with their friends; if children trust and understand each other, this supports the quality of play. Trust children to solve small conflicts in their play by themselves; support them when needed. Help children understand emotions and behaviours of others.
Motor development	
Gross motor skills	Make sure children play outside every day and move in different ways. They need opportunities for balancing, walking and running, jumping, turning, climbing, throwing and catching, kicking, swinging, dancing, wrestling and fighting. They need to take risks and challenge themselves.
Fine motor skills	Children develop fine motor skills when they can explore and play with all types of small objects. These materials need to be available in every play corner indoors. This could be construction materials, tools, loose parts, buttons on clothes. Nature provides all types of materials itself.

Cognitive development	
Key developments	**Tips for practice**
Development of attention and focus	Make sure that children have enough time for exploration in their play: this helps to develop attention and focus.
Language and thinking	Stimulate sustained shared thinking by passing on questions of children to their peers, instead of answering them yourself.
Math	Challenge yourself to recognize all the mathematical thinking children naturally go through in their play. Math is present in every type of play and not limited to numbers and counting.
World knowledge	What knowledge do children acquire in their home environment? Try to integrate that in your classroom and play, so that children can learn from each other, about different experiences.

Reflective Questions

Observe a group of children playing. You do not need to do anything, just watch. Note down which of the above key developments you see.

Select one play area from your practice. Examine it critically. What development are you aiming for here? What could you remove or add to further promote play development?

Key Takeaways:

1. Children's development is holistic; play and developmental domains are interconnected and mutually reinforcing
2. Play is not a preparation for learning and development; it ís learning and development
3. As children develop, the focus and complexity of their play change. Interaction with others is crucial for this development
4. Teachers play a crucial role by guiding and enriching play while respecting children's initiatives

Reflective Question

How can you translate the Key Takeaways to your own practice?

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4.3 Play as a Learning Environment

Objectives

1. Understand the ways in which play functions as an inclusive and effective learning context
2. Design enabling indoor and outdoor environments that intentionally support children's engagement and deepen their play experiences
3. Align child-led play with curriculum goals by observing and scaffolding children's play experiences
4. Differentiate between child-led play, guided play and teacher directed playful activities

"When people play, they are engaged, relaxed, and challenged - states of mind highly conducive to learning." (Mardell et al., 2023, p. 19)

Extensive research over the years has consistently confirmed the benefits of play for children's learning and development. Through play, children **engage with ideas, concepts, and language by manipulating objects, experimenting with materials, taking on roles, solving problems, and using their imagination**. Furthermore, when children play, their activity and learning can span multiple developmental areas. The ability of play to unite and integrate different learning and development areas – its unifying quality – is actually considered one of its most significant attributes. Because **play can be multimodal** (verbal, non-verbal, physical, symbolic), flexible, and adaptive, it also has a unique capacity to meet children where they are developmentally, supporting their strengths while accommodating challenges. This last element is what makes play one of the most inclusive and equitable ways to learn and belong.

However, for children to truly learn through play, their play experiences need to possess certain key characteristics. From neurological and biological viewpoints, these traits have been shown to improve children's focus, understanding, and learning from experiences. Specifically, playful learning experiences that are joyful, meaningful, actively engaging, iterative, and socially interactive are considered the ideal — or optimal — context for deep learning. In essence, **when play includes these characteristics, children are most open to learning, making play an exceptionally effective educational strategy.**

Characteristic of play	Why is it important?	What it looks like in children's play
Joyful	Joyful experiences engage both the heart and mind. Joy enhances curiosity, motivation and interest, which in turn facilitate learning	Laughter, smiles, excitement, enthusiasm, connecting with others
Actively Engaging	When individuals are mentally and/or physically engaged in their activities, they focus better and learn much more	Focused attention, hands-on exploration
Meaningful	Meaningful experiences capture people's attention, prompting them to connect new knowledge with existing understanding, thereby deepening their learning	Linking play to real-life experiences or personal interests
Iterative	Through iteration individuals experiment, revise, explore various strategies, and uncover new questions	Trying again, adjusting strategies, improving ideas
Socially Interactive	Through interactions, individuals often learn from and with each other, sharing and expressing ideas. They are guided into new ways of thinking	Negotiating roles, collaborating, communicating

Table 1. Adapted from Mardell et al., 2023

Watch seven-year-old Molly Wright, one of the youngest TED speakers, explain how play benefits all children in thriving https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aISXCw0Pi94

Recognizing the vital role of play in young children's learning has led to the development of **influential concepts such as playful learning, play-based learning, playful pedagogy or pedagogy of play**, which are now integrated into many early childhood curricula worldwide. These concepts suggest that learning, which is embedded in child-led play and controlled by children can align with learning goals set by adults and produce more meaningful and effective outcomes than direct, adult-led instruction.

The need to connect child-led play with adult-set or curricular goals stems from a tension in our understanding of play as a learning context. While freely chosen, child controlled play strongly supports creativity, imagination, social development, and self directed exploration, it is difficult to predict which specific skills or knowledge will emerge from it. Learning in free play is shaped by children's interests and the environment available to them at the time of their play, meaning that some concepts may not be chosen by children to explore, or their chosen play environment may not support them. **As research shows, while free play is essential for children's learning, it does not guarantee exposure to specific academic content or that children will internalize important concepts.** However, successfully aligning play with adult — or curriculum-led goals requires that children maintain significant control over their learning, with elements that make play meaningful — curiosity, agency, motivation, joy, iteration, and shared exploration — remaining central. In essence, play-based learning occurs when children's interests align with teachers' intentions, through a collaborative process in which adults and children negotiate the direction of learning.

Reflective Questions

When you observe children at play, which of the five characteristics (joyful, meaningful, actively engaging, iteration, socially interactive) do you see most often?

Which do you see less frequently?

In what ways do you allow time and space for iteration – trying, revising, and trying again – in children's play?

How much time is protected for freely chosen, child-directed play in your program?

Are there any concepts or academic topics that you doubt free play can effectively support?

As the terminology surrounding play in education becomes more prevalent, researchers caution against two significant concerns: firstly, the replacement of child-initiated and led play with play activities designed by adults. It is essential to preserve spontaneous, child-led play in early childhood education because it plays a crucial role in promoting children's well-being and identity development. Secondly, it is important to avoid transforming children's play into activities that merely mimic play (or are "dressed up in playful clothing" – Zosh et al., 2018) while in reality they impose structured academic goals on it. When instructional control overshadows children's autonomy and creativity, the spontaneous, imaginative quality that supports cognitive and social development is diminished. **To avoid these pitfalls, teachers must clearly differentiate between authentic child-led play and teacher-initiated or teacher-guided play. Teachers also need to critically reflect on the environments, resources and experiences they offer.**

In one sentence...

Play-based learning emphasizes play as the context, playful learning emphasizes playfulness as a design principle and pedagogy of play emphasizes playful learning as a teacher mindset and a pedagogical stance.

Watch futurist game designer, Jane McGonigal, discussing how learning through play is an innate human characteristic at all ages https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE1DuBesGYM

Creating rich in play indoor and outdoor environments

Play as a learning environment can be initiated and led by children or initiated and guided by teachers. While child-initiated and led play is important and an undeniable right, adults and the environments they create are also crucial in helping children develop their play activities and skills, thereby facilitating the learning that emerges from play. **From a holistic perspective, adults who support play include children's families.**

Reflective Questions

In what ways do you intentionally design or adapt the indoor and outdoor environment of your setting to encourage play initiated by children?

In what ways do the children in your classroom exercise real agency and ownership over their play, materials and environment?

How do the environments, materials and experiences you provide invite exploration?

What new ideas or strategies could you try in your setting or practicum experience to support even more indoor and outdoor play opportunities?

Do you think that indoor and outdoor environments encourage different forms of play (e.g. free play, guided play or teacher- directed playful activities)?

To fully benefit from play, children need ample time to participate in freely available, age appropriate and well-resourced opportunities for exploration, problem-solving, creativity, imagination, testing ideas and constructing meaning. These opportunities should be available both when children play independently and when they interact with peers and supportive adults. Such play can occur indoors and outdoors, as children enjoy both settings and most indoor activities can be offered outdoors.

Given that indoor and outdoor environments are critical to play functioning as a meaningful learning context because they shape what children explore, how they interact and the depth of the learning within their play, the importance of intentionally designed spaces becomes clear. **Intentionally designed play environments do not mean every setting has the ideal space and resources but that adults take actions that maximize the use of space and resources available in their setting.**

Practical strategies for creating enabling indoor play environments include:

- Using movable/adaptable furniture to reconfigure play spaces.
- Ensuring materials are easily accessible to children. This approach also involves assessing the quantity of resources and play objects available and collaborating with children to establish rules that ensure positive experiences for everyone.
- Providing open-ended materials (natural and synthetic) and role-play resources/props that children can use in multiple ways (e.g. fabrics for imaginative play or den-making).

INCLUSIVE PLAYSPACES

Play areas should do more than just guarantee accessibility: they should offer a combination of experiences that are equally joyful, engaging, and meaningful for each child. These spaces should consider both the diversity of play and the diversity of children. Key characteristics include:

- Offering a mix of physical, creative and social play opportunities (e.g. spaces for running or wheeling, storytelling, or playing board games)
- Engaging the senses with interesting shapes, textures, sounds, smells or colors
- Providing various types of space (e.g. quiet areas, sheltered areas and group areas)

Source: Sensory Trust (2020). Inclusive play. https://www.sensorytrust.org.uk/uploads/documents/SensoryTrust-Inclusiveplay 2020.pdf

- Offering real-life materials (e.g., measuring tools, notebooks). These should reflect the interests and lives of the children and demonstrate cultural diversity.
- Ensuring that spaces allow children to make the products of their play visible (e.g., a construction they made) and revisit (iterate) their ideas across days.
- Ensuring that children can influence and take responsibility for the classroom environment and the resources/materials available by being actively involved in the planning, the transformation and the maintenance of the space.
- Building on children's current interests to co-create play spaces.
- Being flexible about adding and removing materials to maintain an engaging environment that responds to children's evolving curiosity, interests, and developmental needs.

Practical strategies for creating enabling outdoor play environments include:

- Viewing outdoor play as a continuation of play-based learning occurring in the classroom, rather than as a break from it.
- Offering natural elements (e.g. water, sand, mud, stones, plants) and varied terrain for experimentation, risk assessment and physical competence. Enhance children's activities with buckets, spades, wheeled toys, bouncy balls etc.
- Providing open-ended materials such as loose parts (e.g. large foam blocks, tires, crates, fabric) for building, cooperation, problem solving or imaginative play.

- Providing diverse play areas and infrastructure that are accessible and meet the needs of all children. While physical accessibility, like ramps or smooth surfaces, is important, true inclusivity involves all children interacting, exploring and playing together at their own pace.
- Ensuring that the space allows children to both engage in energetic play and rest or spend time alone if they wish.

Linking outdoor and indoor play experiences

In the kindergarten yard, a grid was drawn on the ground for children to play tic-tac-toe. At the beginning of the school year, the teacher explained the rules of tic-tac-toe and the children frequently played the game using chalk, small stones or big leaves. However, over time, their interest began to fade. One day, the teacher set a challenge: “How many different games can we play on these squares besides tic-tac-toe? You can also use anything else you want from the yard for your game.” The children brainstormed several ideas, tested them, evaluated them, and in several cases redesigned their games to enhance their playability. For example, one group of children suggested turning the grid into a jumping game, where players had to hop on one foot from square to square without touching the lines. Another group decided to use pinecones as game pieces and created new rules to 'trap' other players' pieces. In the following days, during recess, they played the games they had designed themselves and came up with even more ideas: some games combined physical movement with strategy, while others focused on counting or racing against time. Noticing the children's renewed interest, the teacher encouraged them to draw their games on paper. Photocopied grid templates were provided, and children began drawing arrows to show movement, adding symbols and writing words like "go", “start" or "win" in any way they could. The teacher collected these ideas and together with the children created a game design area in the classroom. Children used the space to test and play their ideas, enriching their games with classroom materials. For example, one group replaced numbers on the dice with colors and made a color-matching game. The area kept the children’s interest alive for a long period of time and evolved throughout the year - eventually, the grid itself became optional. Children's play was enriched with boards from old board games, boards they made themselves, dice with transparent faces on which the children could draw whatever they wanted, hourglasses, paper point tokens, and more. As materials were added and rules revised, children began to see themselves not only as players but also as game designers.

TIPS FOR PRACTICE

Protect and prioritize child-led play

1. Ensure long, uninterrupted periods for child-led play by building time into daily schedules
2. Avoid adult-designed "play-like" activities that limit children's autonomy and agency
3. Communicate to families that child-led play is both a right and a valuable learning context

Aligning play opportunities and environments with curriculum goals

When approached with intention, play as a learning context, can become a deliberate bridge between children's playful learning and the educational objectives of teachers and the curriculum. This means that **teachers can purposefully align play opportunities and environments with curriculum goals**. This process involves different forms of guidance and scaffolding by the teacher that combine child agency and adult expertise. Research-based practices that teachers can use to facilitate such alignment include:

- Scaffold and extend children's learning during play through intentional teacher interaction. This involves teachers joining children's play as participants, and/or employing techniques like commenting on their actions (without however interrupting children's thinking and initiatives), posing open-ended questions, introducing new vocabulary, modelling new skills (e.g. social) and narrating play (see play-based language). This type of intervention requires teachers to observe children's play to identify suitable moments for suggestions without interrupting what children do – play remains child-led. This practice is a form of guided play.

- Integrate learning goals into children's play naturally. In practice, this means that teachers identify curriculum goals and thoughtfully incorporate them in play areas in various forms for children to use as they direct their play (e.g. in a pretend grocery store, children practice counting, categorizing or literacy through related play materials like kitchen scales, calculators, blank price labels). This is another form of guided play.

- Initiate games (e.g. board games or social games like charades) and other types of play with specific learning goals in mind yet allow children to direct their learning within the play context. In such cases, the teacher is responsible for maintaining children's focus on the learning goals while observing and considering the children's own discoveries. Ensuring that children genuinely enjoy the experience is essential. This approach is also referred to as guided play.

- Design activities with playful elements (e.g. fictional or imaginative scenarios, teacher adopts a character or persona, exaggerated facial expressions, playful mistakes) to target specific learning/curriculum goals. The content and process of the activity are predetermined, but the teacher's playful stance, humor and effort to spark children's interest, imagination, and joy make the activity engaging. This approach is a form of direct instruction with a playful mindset, or else, teacher-directed playful activity. Here the adult's playfulness and children's engagement distinguish a playful activity from a teacher-dominated activity.

Reflective Questions

How much control do children truly have in the play experiences you offer?

What challenges do you face when trying to balance teacher-guided and free play?

What criteria do you use to decide when to intervene in play – and when to stay out of it?

What assumptions about learning and teaching do you bring into designing play experiences, whether indoors or outdoors?

Planning playful learning environments. A tool by teachers, for teachers which can help them think and pose questions about whether their learning environments support playful learning. Available at: https://pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Playful%20Learning%20Environment.pdf

Choosing play as a context to support young children in asking productive questions

In a collaborative case study focusing on supporting children's question-asking, one strategy employed by the teacher was question games. These games involved cards with various types of questions, encouraging children not only to think in diverse ways but also to interact with their classmates by asking each other questions. Examples of such questions included "In how many ways we can walk?", "What if you were given three wishes?", "How do you make people laugh?" and "What special thing can you do with your hands?" The nature of question games, as actions undertaken for the purpose of enjoyment, initially led children to request the teacher to play "this game" more often throughout the week. Over time, this enthusiasm evolved into children taking the initiative to create their own cards, allowing them to continue playing with their peers. Thus, the questioning process, which was initially guided by the teacher's initiatives, gradually became driven by children's own emotional involvement and enjoyment, facilitated by the context of play.

A spectrum of play experiences

To better understand how play can serve as a learning environment within formal education, the concept of a 'spectrum' is particularly useful. Play encompasses a range of experiences that differ based on who initiates and directs the activity and whether there is a learning goal. At one end of the spectrum is free-flowing play, where the child both initiates and directs the play. Moving along the spectrum is guided play, where an adult arranges or selects the context or materials of play with a specific learning objective in mind, but the child still retains control over how they play and explore within that context. In guided play, the adult 'sets the stage' and scaffolds learning, but the children drive the play. At the other end of the continuum is adult structured and directed play, which involves adult designed activities incorporating playful elements (e.g. turn taking, puppets, games) that lead to instructional outcomes. Different play-types can be used in multiple combinations to support children's learning.

As it becomes clear, **the critical shift across the spectrum is not whether children are engaging in play, but how much adults guide, structure, or direct the play.** Conceptualizing play as a continuum allows us to appreciate the rich variety of learning opportunities it offers. This perspective also moves beyond the false dichotomy "play vs learning," illustrating instead how play — in its various forms — can serve as both a deliberate pedagogical tool and a context for spontaneous child-driven exploration.

Play experience	Who initiates & directs?	Role of the adult	Learning focus
Free flowing play	Children initiate and direct	Observes, plays along if invited, and supports if needed	Learning emerges naturally through children's exploration and imagination
Guided play	Children direct play within an adult-designed context	Sets up materials, environment, and intentionally scaffolds	Specific learning goals are supported while children's agency is maintained
Teacher-directed playful activities	Adult initiates and directs	Designs and leads playful activities	Clear instructional outcomes using playful elements

Table 2. Spectrum of play experiences in early childhood pedagogy

Outdoor play with loose parts: transforming fixed spaces into dynamic, child-led environments

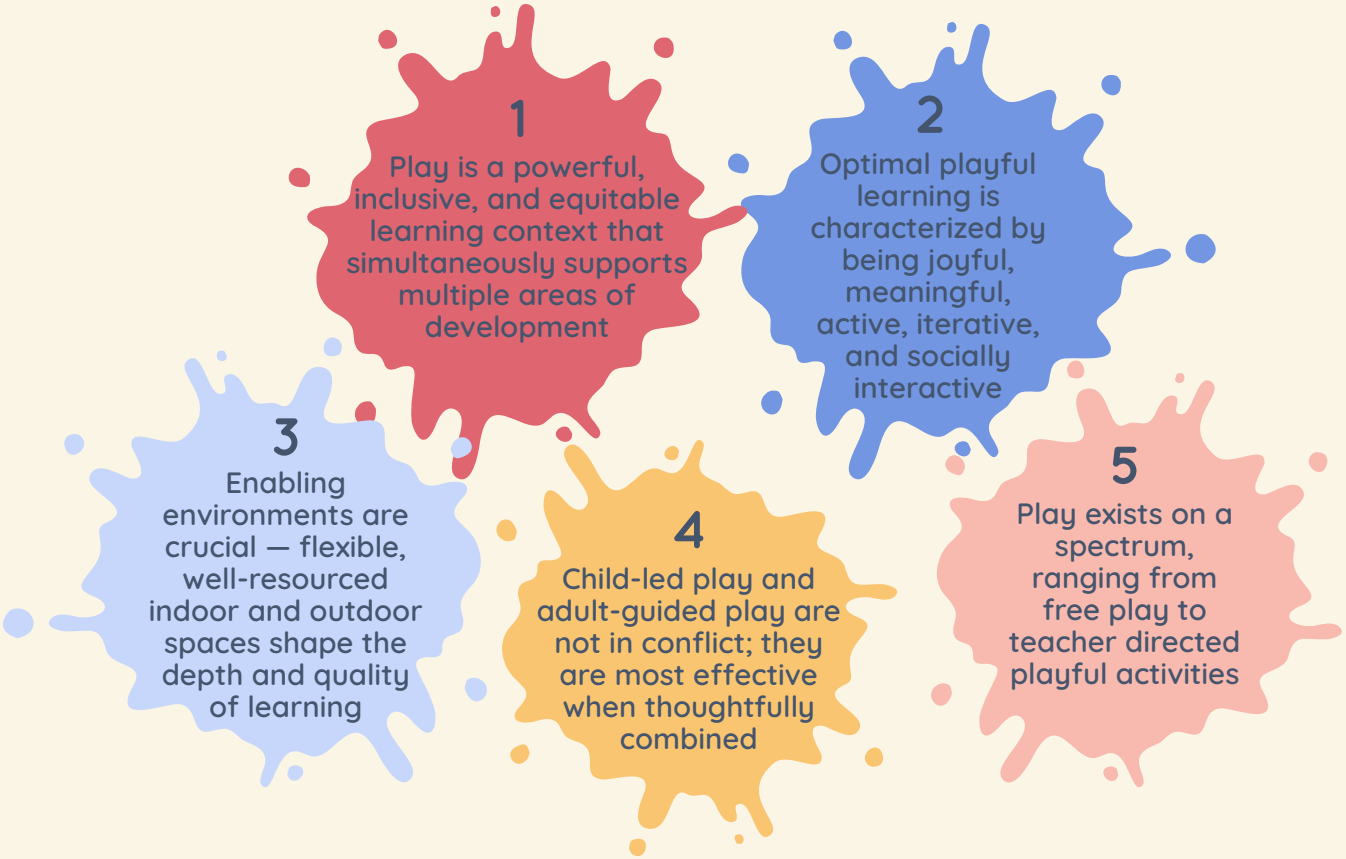
In a preschool setting, outdoor play was initially centered around fixed playground equipment, often leading to repetitive play patterns and frequent conflicts among children. To enrich play experiences, teachers introduced a variety of loose parts, including ropes, buckets, cardboard boxes, scarves, and plastic tubes. These materials were made freely accessible, encouraging children to explore, experiment, and use them creatively. Following these changes, children's play became longer, more imaginative, and highly collaborative. They began constructing complex structures, creating obstacle courses, and incorporating loose parts into dramatic play. For example, children transformed crates and scarves into shops, restaurants, and castles, negotiating roles and inventing stories together. Problem-solving skills emerged more easily as they figured out how to balance crates or use ropes for safe climbing. Conflicts decreased, as children appeared more willing to use their communication and cooperation strategies, often resolving disagreements independently. The teachers' decision allowed the outdoor environment to become a dynamic, child-led learning space.

TIPS FOR PRACTICE

Intentionally align play with curriculum goals

1. Observe children's play to identify opportunities to scaffold learning without disrupting or taking over their play.
2. Integrate curriculum goals into play environments through the use of objects and materials.
3. Use teacher-guided play and teacher-directed playful activities alongside child-initiated play, not instead of it.

Key Takeaways:



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Author: Loizou, E.

4.4 Teacher's Role in play

Objectives

1. Define the essential play-related skills required of ECEC teachers
2. Elaborate teacher engagement typologies and roles
3. Unfold play-based practices that support the development of children's play

Play is the one of the most effective ways children learn and develop during the preschool years; they explore their environment, develop their imagination and creativity, express their emotions, learn to cooperate, and acquire basic knowledge and skills. The teacher is a vital element of all these processes, and it is crucial to unfold the differing practices, actions, and roles every teacher takes to ensure children's play experiences are appropriate, and effectively impact their learning and development.

ECEC Teacher's Play skills

Play literature uses terms such as play, playful learning, learning through play, and play based learning to reflect varying educational approaches and pedagogical practices. These concepts describe the integration of play into learning, often linking it with academic skills while emphasizing the creative ways adults design and embed children's experiences within the curriculum. Play is widely recognized as a fundamental component of ECEC, providing a natural context for development and learning. The pedagogy of play, which encompasses the various ways the teachers support children's play skills development, and the pedagogy of learning through play, which refers to the practical strategies teachers use to promote children's learning through play and playful activities, highlight the methods and contexts that inform teachers' planned practices.

Teaching and pedagogy in the context of play are shaped by teachers' beliefs, knowledge, culture, and experiences. **Figure 1** that follows provides the core professional competencies necessary for implementing play pedagogy.

Figure 1: Core teacher professional competencies for play pedagogy

Source: Adapted from Loizou, E., & Trawick-Smith, J. (Eds.). (2022).

Effective play pedagogy in ECEC requires teachers to possess a set of core play pedagogical competencies. **Observational competence** enables teachers to attentively notice children's play, interactions, and emerging ideas. Building on this, **interpretive competence** allows teachers to read levels of play, understand children's motives, and identify their needs and intentions. **Interactive competence** supports responsive engagement through dialogue, role-taking, and appropriate scaffolding that extends play without disrupting children's agency. **Environmental competence** involves intentionally designing play spaces, selecting materials, and organizing time to invite, sustain, and deepen play experiences. Finally, **reflective competence** allows teachers to evaluate the impact of their pedagogical decisions and adjust their practice to better support children's play and learning. Together, these competencies underpin intentional, responsive, and meaningful play-based teaching in ECEC contexts.

Teachers, drawing on their formal studies, generally possess foundational knowledge related to play, learning, development, and the planning of play-based experiences. Although ECEC teachers frequently discuss play and its importance for children's development and learning, many report feelings of insufficiently being prepared or being uncomfortable when required to actively participate in children's play. Consequently, they are not always equipped to engage meaningfully in ongoing play interactions.

To effectively support children's play, teachers need a clear understanding of the learning foundations underpinning different types of play. In **creative play**, teachers should recognize the key elements of creativity, such as flexibility, originality, and expressive thinking to extend children's ideas meaningfully. Supporting **constructive play** requires teachers to be familiar with the stages of block building so they can assess children's developmental progress and offer appropriate scaffolding. In **experimental play**, teachers need knowledge of basic scientific concepts and inquiry processes to help children make connections through exploration, questioning, and experimentation. Finally, in **games with rules**, teachers should understand children's personal and social competencies, including cooperation, self-regulation, and social negotiation, to support participation, fairness, and shared understanding. This knowledge enables teachers to intentionally plan, observe, and intervene in ways that enhance children's play and learning.

As a core form of play present in many play contexts, pretend play requires teachers to possess specific play related skills, particularly for sociodramatic and imaginative play, to effectively support and participate in children's play. The following section outlines a set of play skills important for pretend play; however, these skills can be applied in multiple ways to extend children's engagement across most types of play.

These skills include: role enactment, the use of interactive dialogue, and the interactive dialogue with role enactment. **Figure 2** elaborates on these skills and their defining characteristics, while also underscoring the interrelationship that emerges among the three.

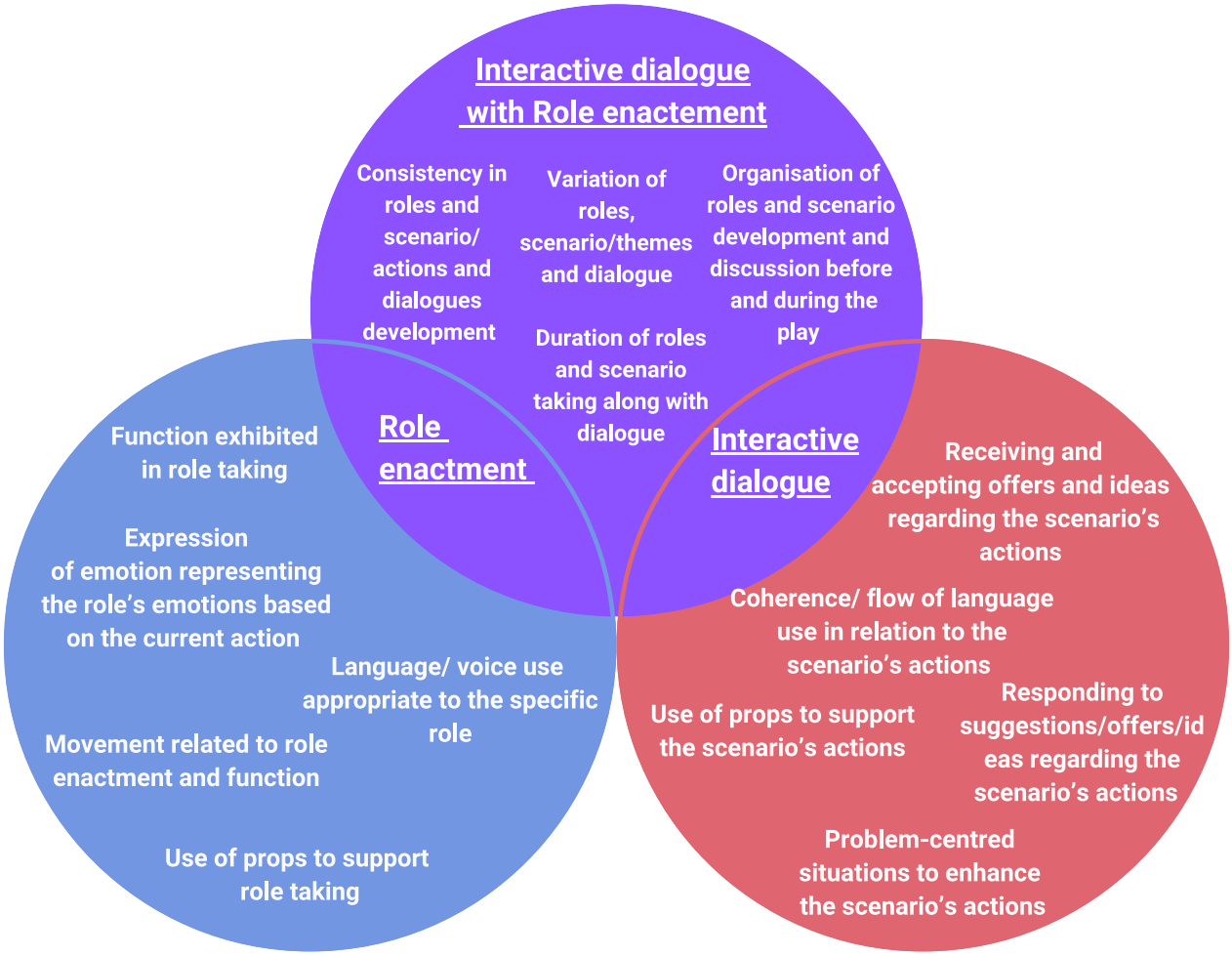


Figure 2: ECTs' sociodramatic and imaginative play skills and their in-between relation.

Source: Adapted from Michaelides, A. & Loizou, E. (2024).

Pretend play skills for ECEC teachers

- **Role enactment** refers to the ability teachers need to have to use their words and voice, the different materials/props, their moves and expressions appropriately to effectively represent the role they are taking. This can be employed during any pretend play scenario or can be employed by a teacher who aims to introduce a new creative play area providing children with the context to effectively play.

> **Role enactment action during creative play**
>
> During a toy store play area, the teacher takes on the role of the toy designer and explains to her customers how she plans to design their wished toy.

- **Interactive dialogue** refers to the suggestions and ideas the teacher uses to create a scenario thus accepting and responding to children's ideas, employing dilemmas to support the play development while in or out of role.

> **Interactive dialogue action during socio-dramatic play**
>
> The teacher observes children playing in the doll house pretending to be mothers taking care of their children. While out of role, the teacher comments that there is a fire in the kitchen and they need to attend to it.

- During **interactive dialogue with role enactment** the teacher having or not a role supports children's role, scenario ideas and duration while ensuring there is consistency and meaningful story development and role enactment.

Use of drama to develop play skills for teachers and children

Drama and play share many common aspects in terms of skills and actions, and drama techniques (DT) are essential for the development of play skills. Common DT can be employed in developing play skills supporting children reach mature forms of play and teachers to be effectively involved in children's play.

Reflective Questions

How do you connect children's play skills with learning and development?

How can you learn to play effectively with the children?

Which type of play can the skill of interactive dialogue with role enactment best support?

The teacher in role DT is one of the most common teachers employ daily as role models in expressing their movements, facial and body expressions, words and use of materials to enact a role.

Improvisation is a DT which involves the connection of players through a positive, and supportive way of developing dialogue; approval of role and scenario ideas, as well as creative expression of body and face for the development of role and scenario.

Moreover, **Phone Conversations** is a DT that supports both children and teachers to develop dialogue, use appropriate language, accept and respond to role and scenario ideas as it develops in interaction between two people and is connected to the role and/or scenario being unfolded.

Employing Phone Conversations during socio-dramatic play

During play in the play area of the "police office" the teacher pretends to be a civilian and using telephone sounds she calls the police to report a thief she encountered in her house, asking for immediate help. This DT allows for dialogue to unfold expanding the socio-dramatic scenario and potentially creating the need for more roles.

Teacher Engagement Typologies and Roles

Play literature identifies a range of approaches teachers employ in engaging with children's play. These encompass both **direct and indirect forms of involvement,** as well as in-role and out-of-role, low- and high-order participation, child-initiated or teacher guided involvement across diverse types of play. Free play and opportunities for children to explore play under their own terms need to be highly appreciated. At the same time, the teacher has a central role in this process, since in collaboration with the children they create an environment that supports and enhances play. Moreover, through systematic observation the teacher identifies the needs and interests of children deciding to intervene directly and/or indirectly supporting and enhancing their play. Also, teachers' engagement involves a wide range of roles, actions, decisions, and reflections, all shaped by their intention and specific aim.

Teacher play engagement typologies (See Fig.3) constitute a comprehensive framework that delineates the multiple ways, mental, physical, and emotional in which the teacher position themselves within children's play experiences. Specifically, the framework encompasses the varied strategies a teacher uses to scaffold and extend children's play skills employing intentional involvement, systematic observation, and reflective practice **(See Fig. 4)** that collectively foster enhanced learning and developmental outcomes. These typologies do not constitute discrete categories but rather intersecting dimensions of pedagogical positioning. For example, during the implementation phase, a teacher may simultaneously adopt an in-role position, engage indirectly, and respond to child-initiated play. Recognizing this dynamic positioning supports intentional, flexible, and responsive play pedagogy.

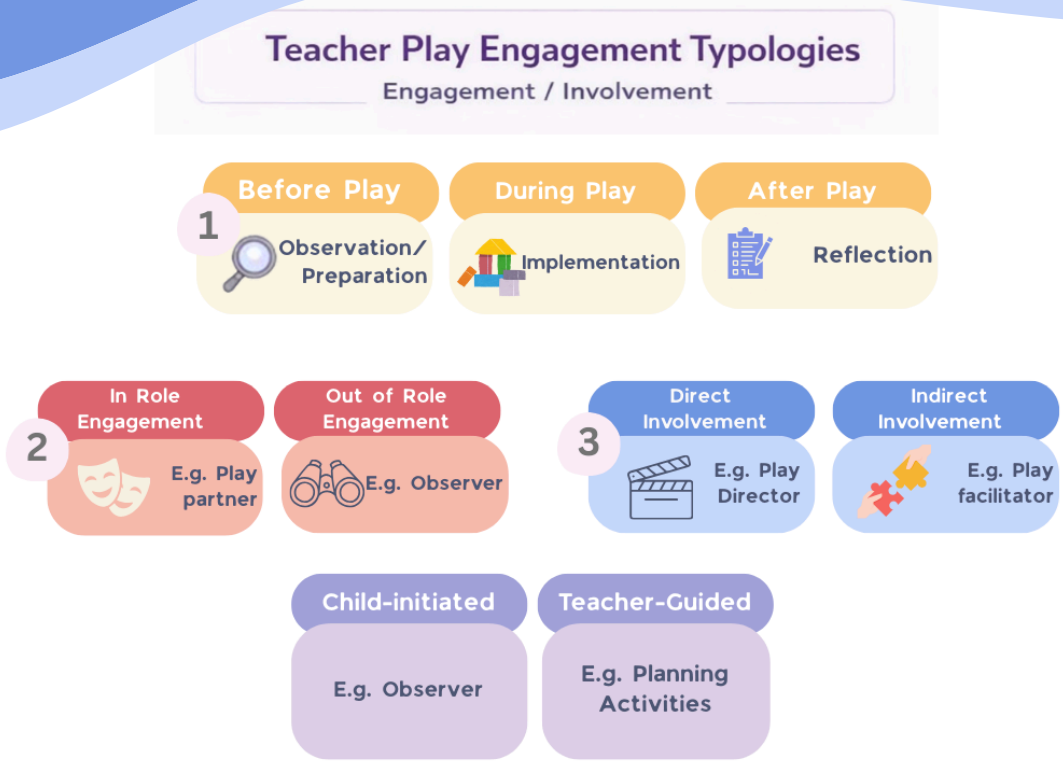


Figure 3: Teacher play engagement typologies.

It is important to note that teacher's engagement can occur in the following major domains: 1. Engagement before, during and after play area development, 2. In and out of role and 3. Direct and indirect involvement encompassing both child-initiated and teacher-guided approaches.

1. Engagement before, during and after development of play areas

There is a process during which children and adults work together in different phases to build a play experience, this being a specific play area or a play activity. In this process the teacher is actively involved with the sole purpose of supporting children. So, they engage before, during and after the development of play areas as described below:

- **Engagement before the development of a play area:** Depending on the goal of the specific type of play or play skills the teacher aims to support children develop, decides to act before the actual play. For example, a visit at a confectionery might be the reason for children to participate in the play area of "Sweets shop", to provide them with information about specific roles, actions and possible scenarios for such a play area.
- **Engagement during playing at a play area:** After observing children's play, she might consider that their scenario needs to become less stereotypical and thus decides to participate as a "complaining customer" who calls (DT telephone conversations) to demand a more unique birthday cake, creating a problem in the scenario which can enforce play development.

- **Engagement after children are actively involved in a play area:** After children's involvement in a specific play area and due to her observation and discussions with the children the teacher might decide to include different or specific materials/toys, change the space arrangement or consider a different type of play to be incorporated in the specific play area, along with different roles she can take during play.

2. In and out of role engagement

Another way teachers can actively participate in children's play is by being in and/or out of role. The specific engagement clearly refers to the teacher taking on a role within the children's scenario to support play. The same goal can be achieved if the teacher provides suggestions and/or options for play development without being part of the children's scenario or having a specific role.

Teacher in role (as a co-player)

Taking on a role during imaginative play

The children are pretending to be "superheroes". They have made capes from fabrics and are running around the classroom, inventing missions. The teacher puts on a cape too and joins as "the helper heroine". She doesn't take control, but she speaks in ways that enrich the play:

"Wow, I heard there's a dragon in the classroom! Do you think I can help you defeat it;" **(enters play)**

When a child says, "You have to fly over the tower", the teacher responds "Okay, I'll spread my cape wide and fly just like you showed me!" **(follows children's rules)**

"Superheroes always work together. Can you team up together to defeat the dragon?" **(encourages collaboration)**

"Oh no, my superhero powers are running out! What can I eat or drink to get my energy back?" **(adds imaginative twists)**

"Tell me what I should do next to save the tower." **(supports role enactment)** The children laugh, give her instructions and invent new scenarios.

Teacher out of role during creative play

The teacher responds to children's suggestions and provides them with empty food boxes, spoons, baking trays, aprons and playdough for their "bakery shop." The children rush in excitedly: "I'm making a cake!", "I'm opening the shop!". They assign roles, create "cakes" and serve each other. The teacher reminds children about their visit at the bakery and the different people they met there **(supporting potential scenario and role development).**

3. Direct and/or indirect engagement

As previously described teacher engagement can be direct or indirect depending on the play needs children are encountering.

Direct Involvement: The teacher observes children's play and identifies key elements that require explicit explanation to support the development of their play and ensure their actions are meaningful within the play context. For example, she provides step-by-step use of materials to help them create an artifact or provides children with pictures to observe and follow in order to construct a castle.

Teacher direct involvement during constructive play

In the classroom, children are building a "tower" with blocks. The tower keeps collapsing and frustration begins to show. The teacher says "Let's try putting the bigger blocks at the bottom. What do you think?". She demonstrates with her hands to stabilize the structure but lets the children do the building themselves. As the tower rises, the children cheer "We did it!".

Indirect Involvement: The teacher observes and enters children's play when invited by children or when identifying a moment to support their play. For example, she is asked to take on a role no-one is interested in, or she observes that some children need an extra push to try out new play materials. In addition, she can act as a role model by helping children, using materials, making connections and reflecting on play details while in role.

Teacher indirect involvement during constructive play

The children are playing in the construction play area with blocks and boxes. One child sits a little further away, watching but not participating. The teacher approaches, smiles and gently says "I can see you're looking at the tower your friends are building. Would you like to add a piece too?". The child hesitates, but the teacher continues "There are some big blocks right here. You can choose one and place it wherever you think it fits." The child picks up a block and places it on the tower. The other children welcome the action with excitement "Great, now it's taller!"

All the above-mentioned forms of engagement in children's play clearly exist along a continuum, **ranging from child-initiated to teacher-guided actions**, with many overlapping areas in between. Many of these approaches prioritise the child and her individual needs, while also considering her level of play skills, learning, and overall development. Within this context, free and structured play are encountered, during which the teacher's role becomes focused on facilitating, supporting, and guiding the learning process.

Teacher's Roles in Play

Across all types of play, it is evident that teachers can assume specific roles that research has shown to be effective in various ways. Accordingly, within the engagement typologies outlined above, it is possible to identify a set of common roles that teachers frequently adopt. These include:

1. **Co-player (Play partner):** Taking on a role either following children's lead or joining in when an opportunity arises to guide and support their play.

2. **Play director:** Providing suggestions and guidance to support the development of play scenarios, roles, and action sequences in all types of play.

3. **Play facilitator (planner):** Offering guidance or suggestions regarding the use of materials, toys, space, or actions to support and extend children's play.

4. **Play helper:** Providing help as requested by children (e.g., cutting a wire, taking on a role) or in ways the teacher deems important to support their play.

These are also mentioned in the implementation process during which the teacher is actively involved in the play development. Depending on the potential skills children can develop the teacher assumes different roles and levels of involvement.

Reflective Questions

How can you participate in a play scenario while respecting children's ideas?

What type of assistance can you provide during creative play to allow children develop their skills?

Do your open-ended questions support children's thinking process?

Teacher as director

Teacher directing play during imaginative play

A group of children want to prepare a scenario about wild animals in the forest. The teacher supports organizing the scenery, distributes roles and suggests ideas for dialogue, and scaffolds the process:

"Let's decide together who will be the deer, who will be the fox and who the owl?", "Think about how each animal moves. Can you show me with your body?" **(sets the stage)**

"What might the owl say when in danger?", "How would the deer ask the fox for help?", "Let's try saying it louder so the audience can hear." **(guides dialogue creation)**

"Now, let's freeze for a moment. Everyone in position! What happens next in the story?", "Shall we add a problem for the animals to solve? Who has an idea?" **(directs flow of play)**

As outlined in this section, teachers participate in children's play using a range of engagement strategies, adopting different roles to support and enrich play experiences. Following are presented practical strategies that teachers can use to carry out these roles effectively.

TIPS FOR PRACTICE

1. Use focused comments- 'will your castle have a queen?' **(imaginative play).**
2. Use close or open-ended questions – 'how can we ensure we win next time?' **(games with rules).**
3. Provide materials and toys- 'Would you like to use these magnetic blocks?' **(constructive play).**
4. Rearrange the space- 'perhaps, you can use the library area as well to try your dance moves' **(creative play).**
5. Plan specific structured activities- 'This book on Sea Life will provide us with more details on preparing our aquarium' **(experimental play).**
6. Provide any type of help/assistance- 'would you like me to cut these cape designs' **(creative play).**
7. Plan visits and out of school experiences- 'our visit to the bakery will help you see how the costumers act' **(socio-dramatic play).**

Teacher's multiple roles and actions to support the development of a play area

The teacher in the context of a project on Travelling helps arrange a travel play area. She provides children with suitcases, maps, tickets, chairs to potentially use as airplane seats. The children rush excitedly stating "I'll be the pilot!", "I'll be the flight attendant!". The teacher ensures that the materials spark imagination. The children organize a trip, talk about destinations and imitate announcements. The teacher observes how they use language and support their chosen roles, and notes down potential needs for the space and materials.

Below, we map some of the teachers' actions discussed in the previous sections, noting the connection to children's play skills and developmental functions.

Teacher Action	Supported Play Skill	Developmental Function
Teacher-in-role	Role differentiation, narrative coherence	Symbolic thinking, self-regulation
Open-ended questioning	Scenario planning, problem solving	Executive function, language
Environmental re-design	Sustained engagement	Motivation, cognitive flexibility

Table 1: Association of teachers' action and children's developmental skills

Play Practice Actions

Play practice actions articulate the specific pedagogical actions teachers undertake to effectively support the development of children's play skills. Play as a pedagogical approach places the child at the centre of learning, recognizing and responding to each child's unique abilities, interests, and developmental needs. It serves as a powerful medium for learning and growth because meaningful engagement in play promotes development across multiple domains, cognitive, social, emotional, and physical. This approach emphasizes a reciprocal relationship; while play fosters children's learning and development, children's developmental progress and acquired skills are also essential for meaningful participation in play and for progression toward more complex and mature forms of play.

Research evidence highlights the pivotal role of the ECEC teacher in effectively facilitating learning through play by providing a safe environment, diverse experiences, and appropriate materials that support all forms of play. In this context, the teacher actively encourages children to explore, collaborate, and develop both skills and knowledge. Successful facilitation requires the teacher to assume multiple, dynamic roles, including **planning and structuring the learning process, participating in and scaffolding children's play, observing and assessing learning outcomes, and engaging in reflective practice** to critically evaluate her own actions and professional impact.

Considering adult-child communication during play the use of questions is specifically considered. The teacher observes, evaluates the context and then decides which questions are appropriate for developing a dialogue with the children during play. The emphasis is on the type of play, the meaning of the actions and the skills that the children are expected to develop. Questions are used to enhance play and are based on the play context. The use of appropriate questions helps to arouse child's play interest and promote the child's involvement.

TIPS FOR PRACTICE

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

1. **Open-ended:** Questions that have multiple answers and help children demonstrate their ability to interpret, synthesize, and evaluate information.
   - o Emphasis on critical and creative thinking
2. **Closed-ended:** Questions that have a specific short or one-word answer and test children's knowledge and memory.
   - o Emphasis on information/concept retrieval **(games with rules)**

All questions are useful for all types of play depending on what the teacher's goal is at the given moment.

Teacher uses questions to support role development during socio-dramatic play

At the play area "restaurant" there are tables and chairs set up and children are using plastic food. The teacher asks several questions to support children to think of potential role development:

"Who will be the cook and who will be the waiter?"
"Who will clean the tables when the customers finish?"
"What will you say when a customer arrives?"
"How will the cook and waiter communicate?"
"Why don't you start pretending to be customers and let the waiter and cook do their job?"

Additionally, the following table outlines how different types of questions affect play skills across various types of play.

	Pretend play	Creative play	Games with rules
Open-ended questions	What can you do when your ship sinks?	What materials will you need to create the wheels of your car?	What can we do to ensure we win next time?
Play skill Development	Creating dilemma in scenario development	Cognitive Flexibility	Play strategy development
Closed-ended questions	What does a doctor use to examine a patient?	Do you need scissors to cut this material?	How many cards are you expected to receive to continue playing?
Play skill Development	Role development actions	Fine motor skills	Rule explanation

Table 2: Associating questions with play skills development (Adapted from Λοΐζου, Ε. 2025).

Two types of planned activities are considered key play actions that directly support children's development before and during play development. Both focus on helping children build essential skills, acquire important concepts or knowledge related to play, and simultaneously deepen their understanding of the world through the play experience.

Through **focused preparatory planned activities**, teachers ensure essential experiences for children to develop the necessary play skills to plan and develop their play supporting learning and developmental achievements. (Before play Engagement)

For example:

- The teacher can prepare a visit to a travel agency or the airport if the play area to be developed refers to travelling during socio-dramatic play.
- The teacher can read a story/book on buildings to enhance children's ideas of constructing buildings during constructive play.

Through **focused enhancing planned activities**, teachers provide the necessary learning experiences that will support children enhance their understanding of concepts that are useful in supporting their play evolvement towards mature forms of play (During play engagement).

For example:

- The teacher can develop group activities such as t-shirt transformation or restyling focusing on flexibility, a creativity skill necessary for creative play.
- The teacher can develop math activities such as counting or sequencing skills that can support constructive/experimental play.

TIPS FOR PRACTICE

1. Organize play areas in collaboration with the children (e.g. themes, materials, rules and routines).
2. Plan daily for materials and toys to be used.
3. Create several new play areas based on the children's suggestions.
4. Plan structured activities to support the development of children's skills (e.g. drama workshops, visits, interviews).
5. Make connections with all means of organizing learning (e.g. use a math structured activity to enhance play skills for play areas such as "Restaurant").
6. Study contemporary literature on play, children's play skills in all types of play. Participate using direct involvement to support early play experiences (e.g. choosing a role for the appropriate scenario).
7. Participate in children's play as a co-player to support and enhance their scenario.
8. Systematically observe children's play actions and skills to decide how to intervene during play.
9. Use observation data to support children individually and/or plan new experiences.
10. Reflect on your own and children's actions in order to reconsider play context and practices.

Source: Adapted from Κυριάκου, M. (2018).

Reflective Questions

How do you involve children in the development of a play area?

How can planned structured activities support children's play skills?

How do you respond to children's play needs during play?

When and how can you effectively participate in children's play?

A **Cyclical play practice (Fig. 4**) is essential for enabling teachers to effectively plan and facilitate children's engagement in high-quality play experiences across all play types and play areas. This practice begins with a **preparation stage**, during which the teacher observes and assesses children's play and uses these insights to inform planning. The next phase is the **implementation stage**, where, based on her planning and children's ongoing feedback, the teacher provides appropriate spaces and opportunities for play to develop. During this stage, she adopts various roles to support and extend children's play toward more mature and complex forms. The final phase is the **reflection stage**, in which the teacher critically reflects on her practices, actions, and their effectiveness in supporting children's play. Through this reflection, she revises her planning and reconsiders her approaches, returning to the preparation stage. This spiral process is continuous and cyclical, involving ongoing action and reflection, with the teacher considering good fit engagement based on observed outcomes and future potential.

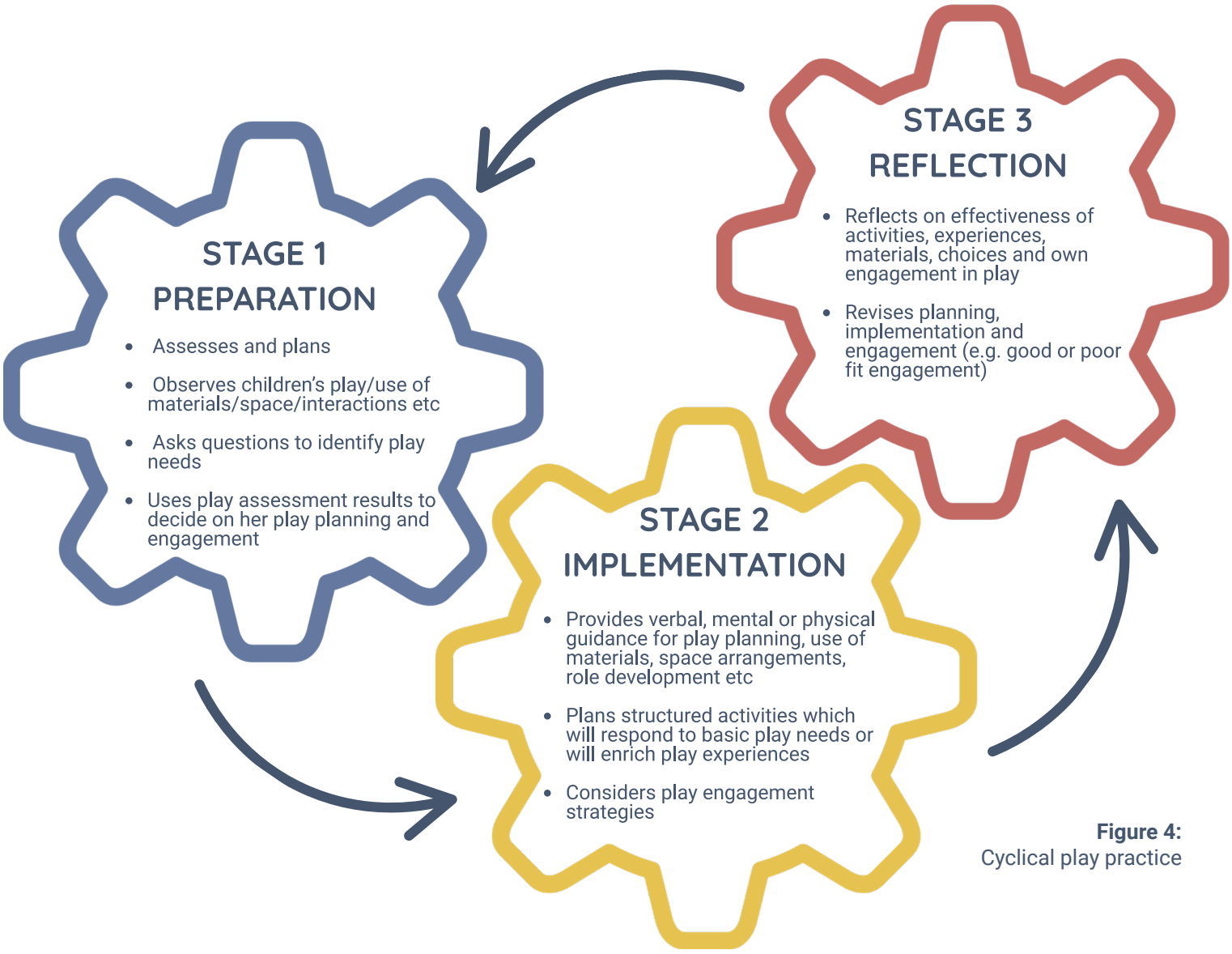
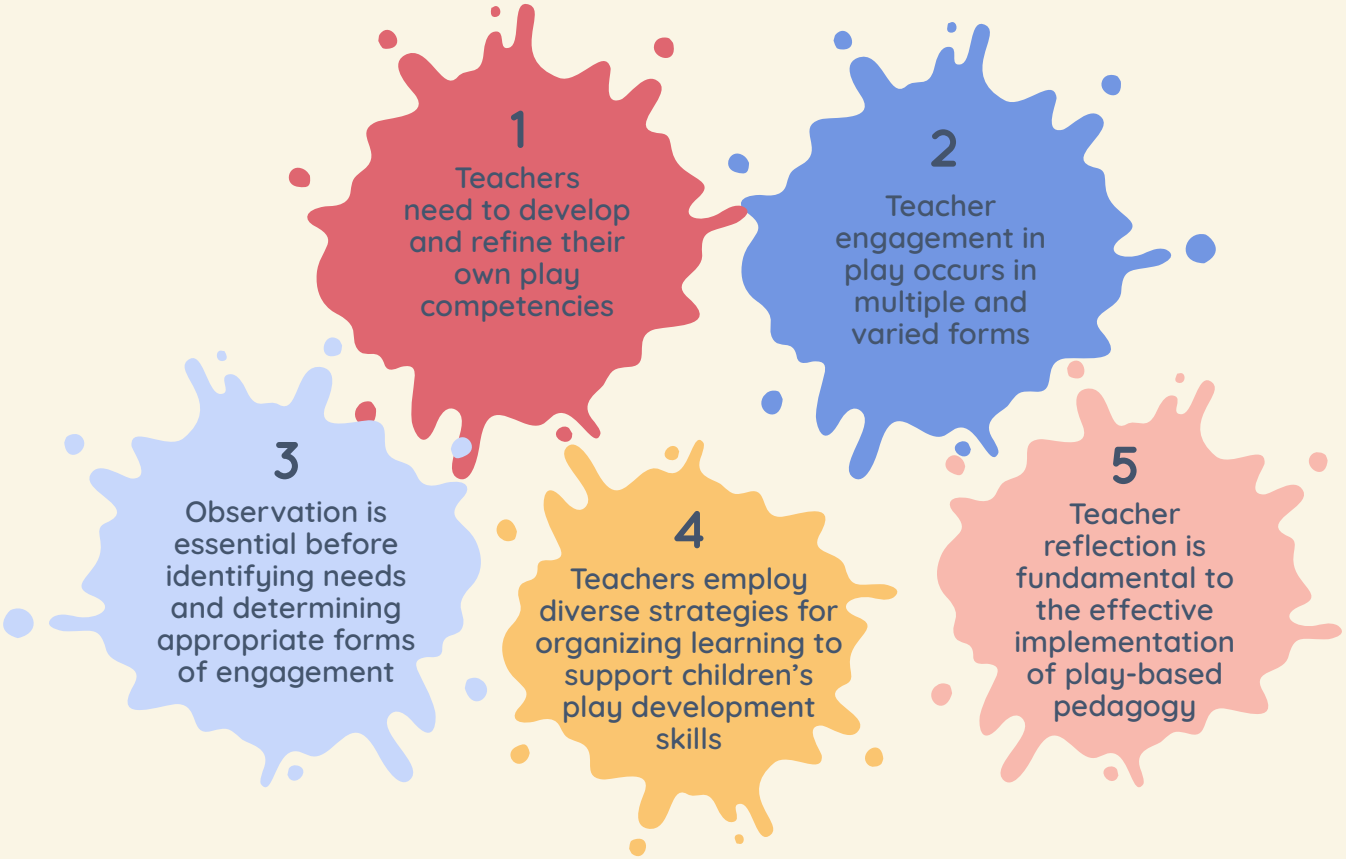


Figure 4:
Cyclical play practice

Teacher Actions Video:

Watch the following video to note teacher's play practices and involvement in children's play: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXqyum4YeEc

Key Takeaways:



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4.5 Play Observation and Assessment in ECEC

Objectives

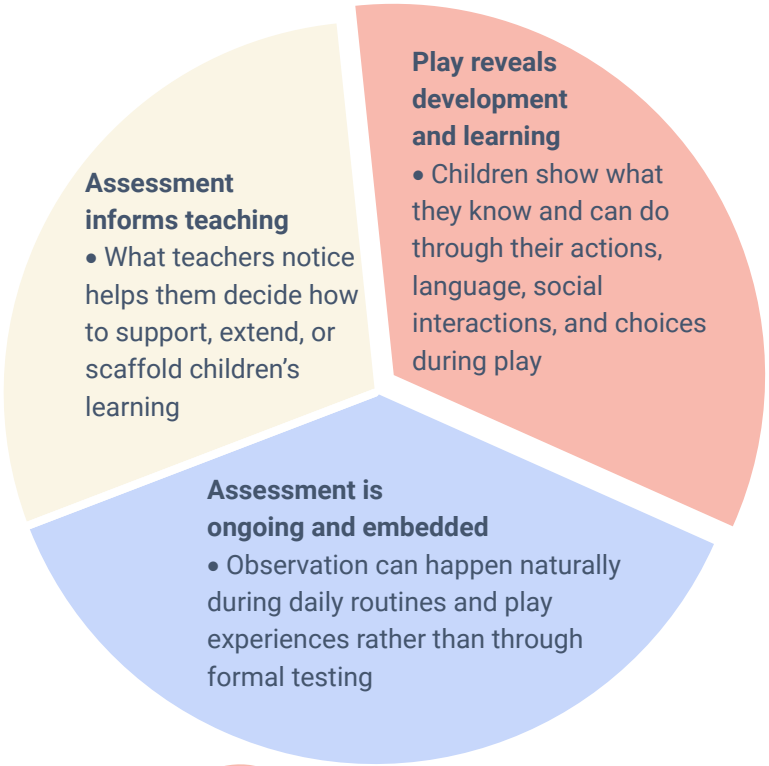
1. Use pedagogical observation instruments and documentation strategies to enhance pedagogical decision-making
2. Analyse children's developmental trajectories through the observation of different play types and contexts
3. Reflect on pedagogical practice in relation to play-based learning and assessment

Conceptual framework of play observation and assessment

Play in early childhood is recognised as a central, natural, and culturally situated mode of learning through which children make sense of their world and develop cognitively, socially, emotionally, symbolically, and physically. From a socio-cultural perspective, play is a socially mediated activity where children engage with culturally organised tools and meanings, supported by peers and adults, and co-construct understanding through interaction. This aligns with theories emphasizing how play creates a zone of proximal development where children's capabilities can be extended through guided activities. Because play is dynamic and context-dependent, observing it requires attention to what children do and the cultural, social, and institutional conditions shaping their engagement. Play manifests differently across settings, with cultural norms influencing what is considered meaningful play and what opportunities children have to explore, negotiate roles, and experiment with ideas.

Understanding Assessment in ECEC

In early childhood settings, assessment about acknowledging, understanding and guiding development and learning. Play observation and assessment rest on three key ideas:



TIPS FOR PRACTICE

1. Teachers use what they observe in children's play to make thoughtful decisions about how to extend, scaffold, or deepen learning in the moment and over time.
2. During play, teachers pay close attention to children's abilities, interests, and potentials. They notice emerging skills that may still be developing and observe challenges or misunderstandings that signal opportunities for support.
3. Rather than stepping in too quickly or directing the play, teachers look for natural openings to extend children's thinking in meaningful ways.

Observing play to inform pedagogical decision-making

Observation is understood as a systematic and intentional process through which teachers attend to multiple elements of play, including children's initiative and agency, the nature of play themes and narratives, social participation and peer interaction, engagement and involvement, emotional expression, problem-solving strategies, and the use of space, materials, and symbolic resources. Observation also encompasses how children negotiate rules, roles, and meanings in play, as well as how play evolves over time across different contexts and situations. These elements highlight that observing play involves more than recording visible behaviours; it requires interpretation grounded in pedagogical, developmental, and socio-cultural understanding.

Constructive play observation elements

During a block play activity, a small group of children collaboratively plans and builds a structure. The teacher observes how children propose ideas, negotiate roles, test hypotheses, and respond to structural failures by adapting their strategies. Attention is paid not only to the final construction, but to the processes of collaboration, persistence, problem solving, and shared meaning-making that unfold throughout the play episode.

Observation of play can take place through both structured and unstructured approaches, each serving different pedagogical purposes. Unstructured observation allows teachers to remain open to the emergent and unpredictable nature of play, supporting a responsive stance that privileges children's meanings and intentions. Structured observation, on the other hand, may involve the use of guiding dimensions or observation frameworks that help teachers focus attention on specific aspects of play, such as social interaction, engagement levels, or the affordances of the environment. Rather than being mutually exclusive, these approaches can be combined flexibly to support reflective practice and informed curriculum decision-making.

Socio-dramatic play observation elements

In a spontaneous dramatic play scenario, children create a "family" or a "shop", assigning roles, developing narratives, and negotiating social rules. The teacher observes how children draw on cultural references, express emotions, manage conflicts, and regulate participation within the group. This observation foregrounds the symbolic, emotional, and social dimensions of play, as well as the ways children explore social relationships and norms through shared imagination.

Assessing and observing play requires a multidimensional approach. While the frequency of play experiences, such as duration, number of play episodes, or recurrence of specific play forms, provides valuable information about children's opportunities to engage in play, it is insufficient on its own. Other dimensions must be considered, including the quality of play, the depth of engagement, the complexity of play narratives, and the degree of symbolic, social, and cognitive challenge involved. The examples above illustrate how similar play forms may vary significantly in richness and developmental potential depending on children's involvement, interaction patterns, and the contextual conditions provided.

A multidimensional observational approach enables teachers to consider that:

- Play is a primary context for learning and not a supplementary activity.
- Observation is an interpretative pedagogical act, not a neutral recording process.
- Tensions between child-initiated play and adult-led assessments require a reflective balance.
- The diversity and frequency of play types, together with the quality of engagement and the richness of play narratives, provide insights into the inclusiveness, relational dynamics, and educational potential of learning environments.

Reflective Questions

How can teachers observe play in ways that respect children's agency while still informing curriculum and assessment decisions?

What tensions emerge between open-ended play and structured assessment, and how can these be addressed in practice?

Suggested resources:

UNICEF – Learning through play https://www.unicef.org/early-childhood-development/play

University of Cambridge – The Pedagogy of Play (video) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_jK-jC2__Fw

Understanding Play Through Observation

Understanding play development provides teachers with frameworks that support meaningful observation and responsive pedagogical decision-making. Play unfolds across multiple dimensions: social, cognitive, linguistic, motor, and symbolic, evolving as children interact with their environment, peers, and cultural contexts. Children's play reflects fluid patterns of engagement that show how they think, feel, and relate to others. Understanding these dimensions enables teachers to interpret children's actions and design environments that support learning across various developmental domains.

- **Socio-emotional development:** Children engage in solitary, onlooker, parallel, associative, and cooperative play, shifting between them based on context and relationships. These dynamic patterns reveal how play supports social connection and negotiation.

- **Cognitive development:** Cognitive and symbolic perspectives show how play reflects developing thinking, from sensory exploration in functional play to planning in constructive play and role negotiation in dramatic play. Language development further enrich play, revealing children's problem-solving and communication.

- **Motor development:** Motor development is key, as physical activity supports coordination, balance, and fine motor control. Motor engagement during play reveals children's physical competencies and approaches to planning and problem-solving.

Children's play is shaped by family practices, community norms, and cultural values. Therefore, teachers must consider these contexts when interpreting play. For example, certain games may dominate in one cultural setting, while imaginative play may be prominent in another. Recognising these cultural nuances helps teachers create inclusive environments that respect children's backgrounds.

Cultural and developmental contexts in play productive questions

In one early childhood setting, teachers observe that children frequently engage in outdoor games involving physical coordination and group participation, reflecting family and community practices that value collective activities and outdoor play. In contrast, in another setting, children predominantly engage in extended imaginative play, creating complex narratives with symbolic materials, drawing on cultural traditions of storytelling and role-play. Rather than interpreting these differences as indicators of developmental delay or advancement, teachers consider them as expressions of culturally mediated play experiences. By reflecting on the diversity and frequency of play types, and on the quality of engagement within them, teachers adjust materials, space, and routines to extend play complexity, introducing new props, reorganising play areas, or supporting peer interaction, while respecting children's cultural backgrounds and developmental pathways.

Understanding developmental pathways in play enables teachers to interpret actions sensitively and plan appropriate scaffolding. Rather than assuming linear progression, teachers can view observed patterns as indicators of current interests, competencies, and social engagement, reflecting on how materials, space, and routines can support more complex interactions. Additionally, observing the diversity and frequency of play types can inform curriculum decisions, ensuring that all children have access to a rich, balanced repertoire of experiences.

Reflective Questions

What does variation in play forms reveal about children's social and emotional development?

How can teachers support increasingly complex play without imposing rigid developmental stages?

Type of Play	Social Participation	Cognitive Strategies	Language Use	Emerging Competencies
Identify the main type of play the child is engaged in note if the play changes within the observation period or if multiple types occur simultaneously.	Observe how the child interacts with peers and adults. Consider the quality of social interactions (positive/ negative, collaborative/ compet itive).	Note problem solving approaches. Record how the child organise their actions and make decisions during play.	Record how the child communicates during play. Include non-verbal communication if it conveys meaning (gestures, facial expressions).	Identify skills and abilities the child demonstrates. Record evidence of learning or developmental progress within the context of the play episode.

Table 1: Observation/reflection instrument

Organising observation and assessment of play

Observing and assessing children's play can be done effectively by following a clear and practical approach **(see Figure 1)**. Teachers should begin by deciding what to observe, and being clear about the purpose of the observation, whether to understand developmental progress, plan activities, or support inclusive participation.

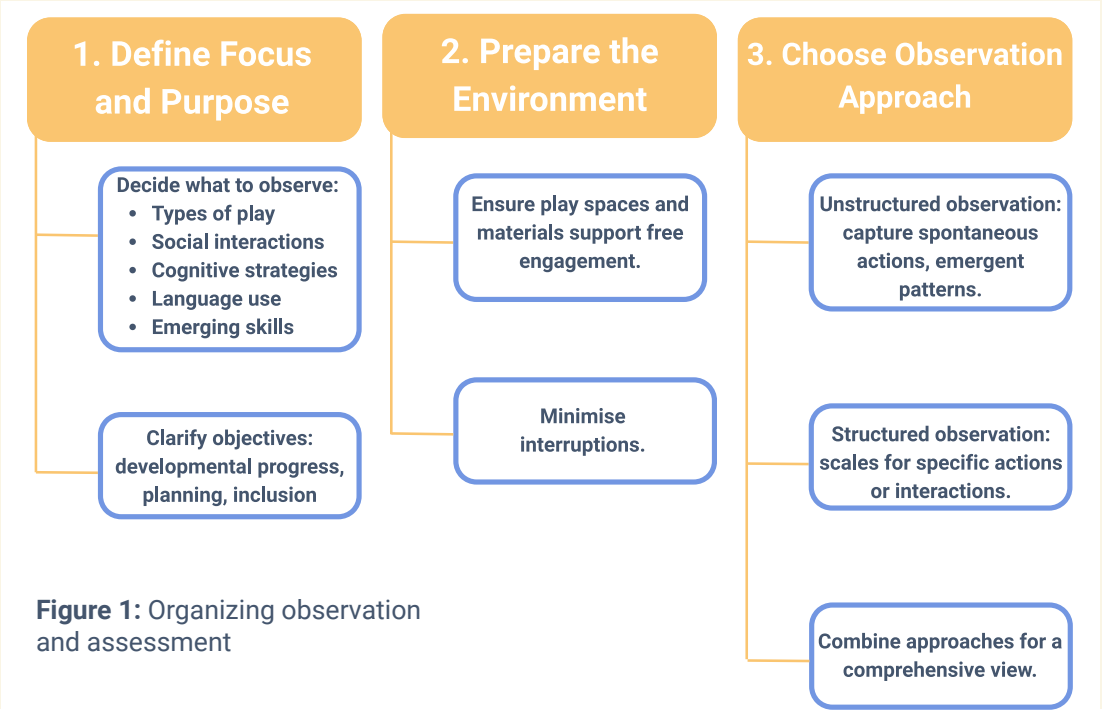


Figure 1: Organizing observation and assessment

Then they need to set up the space, decide how and when to observe, take notes or photos, and reflect on what is seen. These observations provide the basis for using structured assessment tools and scales, presented in the next subsection, to support systematic recording and interpretation of children's play.

Observing and assessing play requires methodological awareness and ethical sensitivity. Because play is dynamic and context-dependent, teachers need tools that support systematic observation without fragmenting play or imposing rigid interpretations.

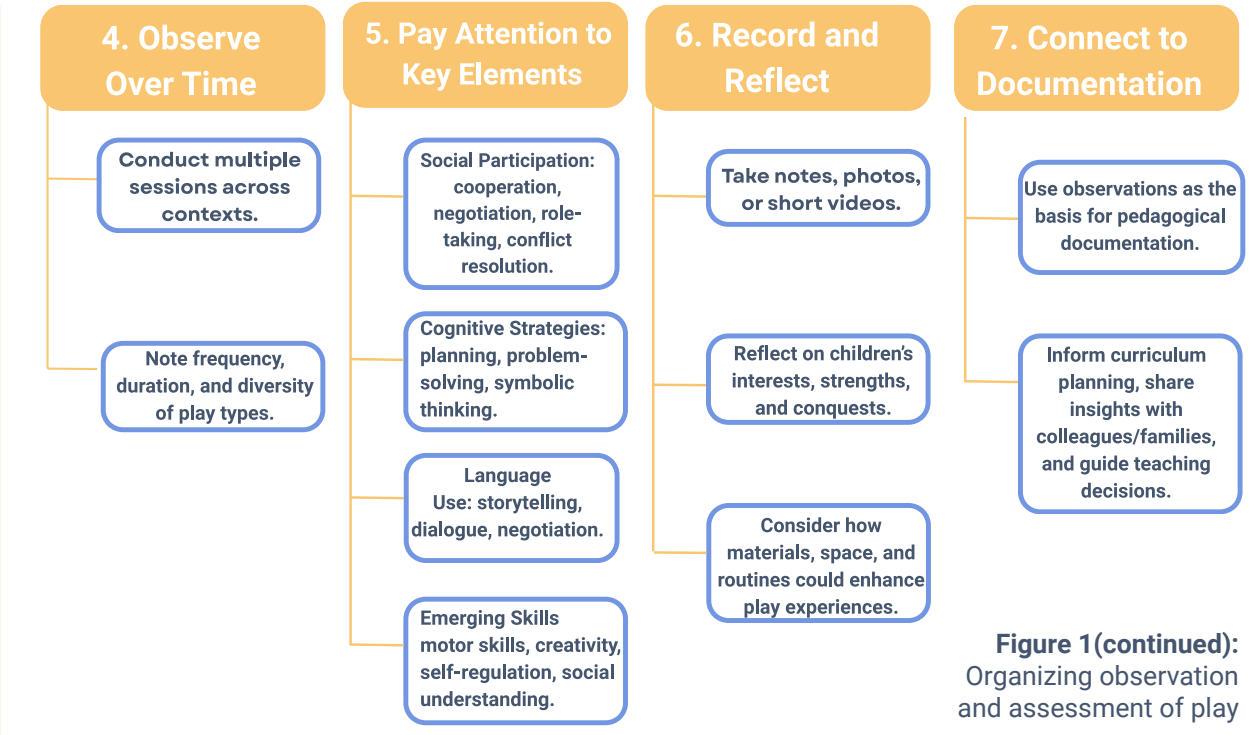


Figure 1(continued): Organizing observation and assessment of play

Observation strategies involve making practical decisions about **when**, **where**, and **how** to observe. For example, deciding whether to observe a child during free play or a group activity (timing), whether to focus on one child, a small group, or the whole class (sampling), and which aspects of play to pay attention to, such as social interaction, problem-solving, language use (focus), or in the space opportunities.

Observation also requires ethical considerations. Teachers should ensure that children are respected, feel safe, and are not singled out unfairly. Inclusive observation means noticing the participation of all children, including those with different abilities or backgrounds, and being aware of how adult authority can influence play (sensitivity to power relations).

When used reflectively, observation tools help teachers notice patterns in children's behaviour, question assumptions about learning, and plan educational actions. For instance, if a child repeatedly chooses solitary play, an teacher might reflect on whether the environment encourages social interaction or if the child needs support to join peers. Similarly, observing how children negotiate roles in dramatic play can guide the teacher in designing activities that foster collaboration and communication skills.

Reflective Questions

In what ways can observation organisationinfluence what you notice and attend to during children's play?

What ethical considerations arise when observing children, and how can you address them in your practice?

Suggested resources:

ERIC – Developing an Observational Tool to Support Play-Based Teaching https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1478006

University seminars on observing play (videos) https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=observing+play+early+childhood

Observation tools for children's play

Observation of children's play can focus on different aspects: the children themselves, the environment in which play takes place, or the teacher's role. Selecting the right instruments depends on the specific focus and purpose of the observation: whether to understand children's social interactions, cognitive strategies, engagement, or emotional well-being; to evaluate the learning environment; or to reflect on adult involvement and facilitation. The tables below organise key observation and assessment tools by these three foci, providing teachers with a practical reference for choosing instruments that best support systematic and meaningful observation of play.

Instrument / Tool	Main Focus / Dimensions	Target of Observation	Notes / Practical Use	Links
Play Observation Scale (POS)(Rubin, 2001)	Social participation, cognitive play forms	Peer interactions, use of materials, play themes	Supports analysis of inclusion/ exclusion and diversity of play experiences	https://pt.scribd.com/document/249151144/Rubin-play-Observ-Scale
Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment – TPBA-2 (Linder, 2008)	Cognitive, socialemotional, communicative, sensorimotordevelopment	Children's natural play	Holistic system for individual and group assessment	https://www.amazon.com/Transdisciplinary-Play-Based-Assessment-TPBA2-Linder/dp/155766871X
Leuven Well Being and Involvement Scales (Laevers, 2005)	Emotional well being, depth of involvement	Play quality	Strengths-based interpretation of children's engagement	https://emotionallyhealthyschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/sics-ziko-manual.pdf
Child's Play & Self-Regulation (CP&SR) Checklist (Bredikyte & Brandisauskiene, 2023)	Pretend play complexity, self regulatory capacities	Executive function, intentional behaviour	Integrates El'konin's theory, emphasizes executive function	https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10766374/pdf/fpsyg-14-1186512.pdf

Table 2: Tools/Scales for observing children's play

Additionally, there are observation tools that focus on the teacher, which are essential for understanding how adult actions, positioning, and interactions influence children's play and learning. These tools help teachers reflect on their role as observers, facilitators, or co-players, showing how different approaches can support or limit children's autonomy, engagement, and social participation. By systematically examining adult involvement, teachers can identify strengths, consider areas for improvement, and make informed decisions to enhance the quality of play experiences for all children.

Instrument / Tool	Main Focus / Dimensions	Target of Observation	Notes / Practical Use
Teacher Play High & Low Inference Observation Tool (Michaelidou, 2025)	Teacher positioning and actions	Adult role: observer, facilitator, co-player	Helps reflect on how adult engagement affects children's autonomy and learning
Play skills and Teacher Role (socio-dramatic and imaginative play)(Loizou, 2016)	Roles,scenarios, processes	Teacher direct and indirect involvement in socio-dramatic and imaginative play	Links observation of play to pedagogical planning and reflective practices
Constructive Play Teacher Guide (Loizou, 2019)	Construction actions	Teacher direct and indriect involvement in constructive play	Links observation to play development and pedagogical planning

Table 3: Observation tools focusing on the teacher during play

Documentation in play-based early childhood education

In play-based contexts, documentation prioritises processes rather than products, seeking to capture how children engage with materials, negotiate meanings, make decisions, and construct understandings over time. perspectiveThis positions documentation as an interpretative act grounded in careful observation and professional judgement, rather than as a neutral record of events. Pedagogical documentation is a cyclical and reflective process that integrates observation, recording, interpretation, and pedagogical action, as presented in **Figure 4.**

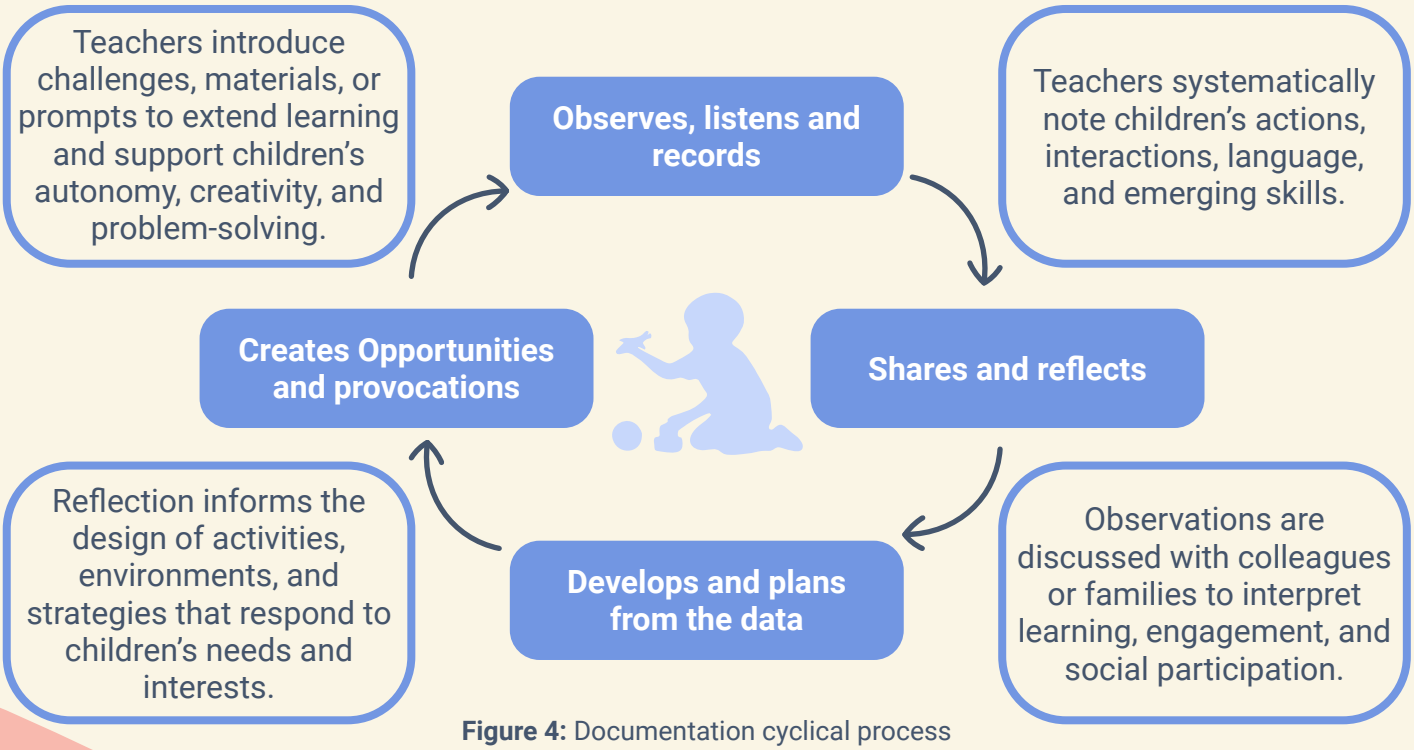


Figure 4: Documentation cyclical process

Teachers observe children's play attentively, note learning evidence and reflect on what this evidence reveals about children's interests, competencies, social interactions, and emerging challenges. This understanding informs planning, curriculum design, and environmental arrangements, enabling teachers to create responsive learning opportunities. Importantly, documentation shifts attention from documenting what children do to understanding how and why learning unfolds, thereby providing insights into children's agency, engagement, relationships, and meaning-making within play. Documentation also enables listening to children's perspectives in situ. Outdoor documentation practices can reveal children's unique interactions with their environment, supporting rights-based and child-centred pedagogy. Documentation focuses on learning processes and interpretation gives meaning to evidence. Various strategies can be employed to effectively document play.

TIPS FOR PRACTICE

1. Narrative strategies—such as anecdotal records and learning stories—document play within its context and relationships, offering rich qualitative insights for reflection and planning. For example, a teacher might record a child improvising stories with toy animals to observe language and creativity, or document outdoor water-and-sand play to highlight curiosity, problem-solving, and collaboration.

2. Visual documentation, including photographs and video recordings, captures gestures, spatial arrangements, and interactions that might otherwise be overlooked, making the often-invisible aspects of learning and engagement tangible. For instance, a video of children acting out a story in a dramatic play area can show creativity, communication, and emotional expression in real time.

Children's artefacts, creative outputs, and digital portfolios provide longitudinal perspectives, enabling teachers and families to track development, revisit past experiences, and reflect on changes in understanding and competence over time. For example, a child's series of self-portraits across several months can illustrate growing self-awareness and artistic skill.

Reflective Questions

How does documentation support reflective and responsive teaching?

How can children actively participate in documentation processes?

Suggested resources:

- Reggio Children – Pedagogical documentation https://reggio-inspired.com/blog/reggio-inspired-documentation
- The Power of Documentation in the Early Childhood Classroom https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globallyshared/downloads/PDFs/resources/pub s/seitz.pdf
- Pedagogical documentation explained - Training course https://eydigifolio.ipb.pt/e-learning.php

Assessing the early education environment: space, materials, and play contexts

Assessing the early childhood education environment is crucial for understanding how spaces and materials support children's play and influence engagement, creativity, autonomy, social and cognitive development. Play is shaped by multiple dimensions of the environment, including physical, psychological, social, and material aspects, and its quality depends on the interplay between these elements.
To assess environmental quality, it is useful to establish guiding principles that translate theoretical concepts into observable criteria **(See Table 5)**

Guiding Principle	Description	How It Can Be Observed / Assessed
Accessibility	Ensures that all children can independently engage with spaces and materials, promoting free choice and autonomous exploration.	Children moving freely without adult assistance, reaching materials easily, choosing activities independently.
Flexibility	Allows spaces to support multiple configurations, adapting to children's intentions and emergent activities.	Furniture and materials being rearranged by children or teachers, spaces used for different types of play and learning.
Affordances	Provides a range of opportunities for action, including movement, manipulation, construction, and symbolic representation.	Children engaging in diverse activities: climbing, building, drawing, role-playing, or experimenting with materials.
Sensory richness	Encompasses visual, auditory, tactile, and proprioceptive stimuli, supporting various types of play.	Presence of varied textures, sounds, colours, and materials; children exploring these through touch, movement, and play.
Cultural responsiveness	Recognises and values children's experiences and identities, fostering belonging and expression.	Materials, displays, and activities reflecting diverse cultures, languages, and traditions; children sharing personal experiences.

Table 5: Principles that ensure high quality environments

Spatial organisation is another critical factor in promoting autonomy, collaboration, and sustained engagement. Well-structured spaces with clearly defined functional zones for different types of play, such as construction, role-play, reading, or active physical areas, facilitate smooth transitions and autonomous choices, reduce conflicts over resources, and encourage spontaneous social interactions.

Circulation within the space should allow children to move freely between areas without constraints. Outdoor environments offer unique opportunities for sensory exploration, gross motor activity, and interaction with natural elements. In these settings, risk-taking should be considered, balancing safety with challenges that support self-regulation, confidence, and resilience.

Materials play a central role in facilitating play and promoting rich, varied experiences. Open-ended materials, also known as loose parts, include blocks, fabrics, boxes, natural elements, and manipulatives, offering multiple possibilities for use that encourage creativity, problem-solving, and the construction of symbolic narratives. Assessing material quality involves observing whether resources allow multiple meanings and uses, sustain prolonged and collaborative play, and provide sufficient diversity in terms of shape, size, texture, and weight to stimulate different types of experiences. The presence of highly structured, single-function toys should be balanced to avoid limiting autonomous exploration.

To conduct systematic assessments, several international tools have been developed to document environmental quality and identify opportunities for improvement.

- The PERS/CERS (Play Environment Rating Scale / Creative Environment Rating Scale), evaluates the quality of settings in terms of organisation, accessibility, material diversity, and adult-child interactions (Shiyan, et. al, 2018).
- Reggio Emilia-inspired tools, such as the Early Years 360° Environment Audit, offer a holistic evaluation of aesthetics, functionality, accessibility, and relational aspects of the environment, including how space stimulates the senses and fosters meaningful interactions (Irresistible Learning, 2018).
- In addition, affordance inventories analyse the range and quality of action possibilities available in the environment, helping teachers understand how spaces and materials support different forms of play (Kyttä, 2004).

Complementing these tools, systematic direct observation methods are recommended, including structured action records, activity mapping, movement flow analysis, teacher and child diaries or interviews, and photographic or video documentation to capture emerging patterns and updated affordances. This combination of theoretical principles, systematic observation, and internationally validated instruments allows not only the diagnosis of current environmental quality but also the planning of interventions that enhance autonomy, creativity, engagement, and inclusion, ensuring that spaces and materials genuinely support children's play.

Reflective Questions

How do space and materials influence children's play experiences?

Which affordances are underrepresented in your environment?

The environment acts as a pedagogical agent. Affordances shape plays possibilities. Accessibility supports inclusion.

Suggested resources:

OECD – Early learning environments https://www.oecd.org/education/

Building Brains For the Future: A Look at Playful Learning in Preschool and Kindergarten (video) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y20-G6AnIV0

The use of observation pedagogical tools and pedagogical documentation within a play based pedagogy carries significant implications for teaching practice. These tools shift the teacher's role from a mere observer or evaluator to an active facilitator of children's learning, enabling a more nuanced understanding of each child's competencies, interests, and learning trajectories.. By integrating documentation into daily practice, teachers can revisit and analyse experiences, co-construct meaning with children, and use insights to plan future activities, ensuring continuity and progression in learning. Also, the combination of assessment grids and documentation promotes inclusivity and equity. Teachers can identify children who may have fewer opportunities to participate in certain types of play or who require specific scaffolding and adjust the learning environment accordingly to meet their needs. This process aligns with the principles of child-centred pedagogy, which respect and support children's agency, voice, and active engagement in play. Furthermore, these practices foster professional collaboration, as documentation and systematic observation provide a shared language for teachers and families to discuss children's development, thereby enhancing the coherence of pedagogical strategies across contexts.

Table 5 is an example of an observation/reflection grid that can guide teachers' actions towards effective reflective practices.

Reflective Questions

How does systematic observation influence everyday teaching decision-making?

How can assessment and documentation promote inclusion and equity?

Observed Pattern	Identified Need	Teacher Action	Environmental Adjustment	Follow-up
Describe what the child or children are doing, e.g., avoiding a group activity, repeating a behavior, showing curiosit	What need does this behavior show? e.g., social interaction, self-regulation, confidence, engagement	What will you do to support this need? e.g., modelling, guidance, prompts, encouragement	How will you adapt the environment or materials to support learning or engagement?	How will you check progress or follow up? e.g., observe next session, note improvements, plan further support

Table 5: Observation/reflection grid

TIPS FOR PRACTICE

Based on the observation/reflection grid

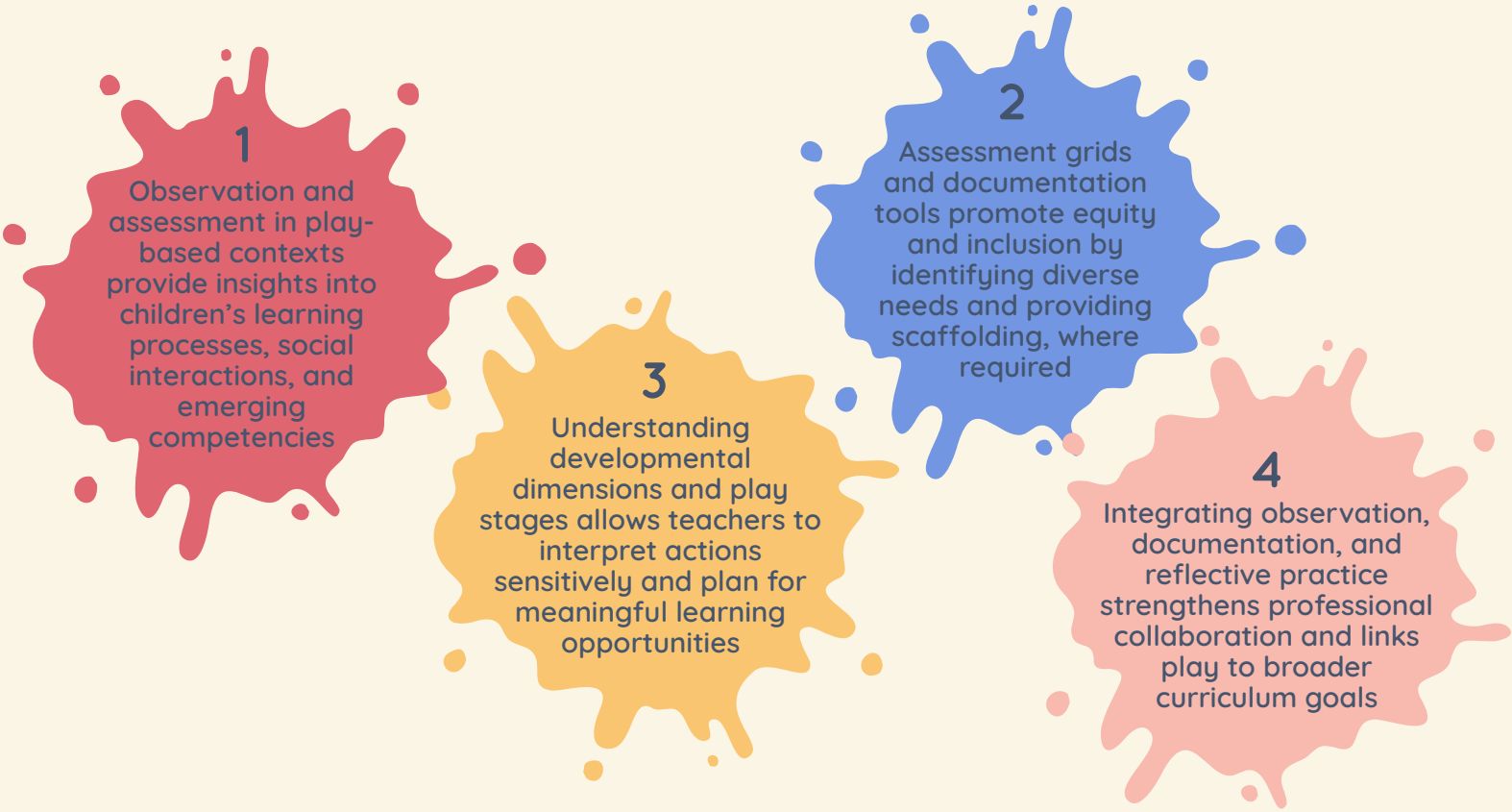
1. Keep observations factual and avoid interpretations in the first column.
2. Connect the identified need to the specific pattern you observed.
3. Plan actions that are practical and responsive to the child's interests and abilities.
4. Adjust the environment to make participation easier or more motivating.
5. Use the follow-up to track progress and plan next steps.

Suggested resources:

The Power of Playful Learning in the Early Childhood Setting https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/summer2022/power-playful-learning

Reflective practice in early childhood education (videos) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SplxysYNP10 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqjEY-kJFjo

Key Takeaways:



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Chapter 5: Conclusion and Reflection

Play is widely recognised as the leading activity of early childhood development because it is both a natural expression of the child and a powerful context for learning. As a two-fold process, play simultaneously reflects children's current developmental level and enhances learning across content areas. When children engage in play, they reveal their cognitive abilities, language skills, social understanding, emotional regulation, creativity, and physical competencies. At the same time, play stretches these abilities by presenting new challenges, roles, rules, and problem-solving opportunities that promote deeper learning.

Children participate in diverse types and forms of play, each contributing uniquely to development. Object-oriented play supports sensory exploration, fine motor coordination, and early cognitive skills such as classification and cause-and-effect reasoning. Socio-dramatic and imaginative play foster language development, perspective-taking, self-regulation, and social competence as children negotiate roles, follow implicit rules, and construct shared narratives. Constructive and creative play enhance planning skills, spatial awareness, and divergent thinking. Outdoor and physical play promote gross motor development, risk assessment, resilience, and overall well-being. Through these varied experiences, children integrate knowledge and skills across all areas of development in meaningful ways. Within these play contexts, children have opportunities to operate within their Zone of Proximal Development. Play naturally creates situations in which children challenge themselves beyond their current level of mastery. For example, when engaging in pretend play, children often use more advanced language, follow more complex rules, and demonstrate higher levels of self-regulation than they typically exhibit in non-play contexts. With sensitive adult support or capable peers, children internalize new skills and gradually perform them independently.

The teacher plays a crucial role in ensuring that play remains both meaningful and developmentally enriching. Teachers design environments that invite exploration and inquiry. They ensure materials are accessible, open-ended, and culturally meaningful. They observe closely, listening to children's interests and emerging skills. At times, teachers take a step back to protect child-initiated play, at other times, they step in as observers, co-players, facilitators, guides, or mediators. This fluid movement along a continuum from child-initiated to teacher-guided experiences ensures that play remains both joyful and purposeful. In child-initiated play, teachers carefully observe and create environments rich in materials and possibilities, allowing autonomy and ownership. In more teacher-guided experiences, teachers intentionally introduce new concepts, vocabulary, or strategies that extend thinking and scaffold learning. Effective teachers know when to step back to preserve the integrity of play and when to intervene to deepen engagement or support inclusion.

Observation and assessment are essential components of effective play-based practice. Authentic assessment in play-based settings involves documenting children's interactions, language use, problem-solving approaches, and emotional responses. These observations provide valuable insights into each child's strengths, interests, and areas requiring support. These observations also inform future planning, helping teachers refine environments, introduce new challenges, and provide targeted support. Assessment is not separate from play but embedded within it, informing planning and ensuring that learning experiences remain responsive and individualized.

Ultimately, play-based practice is a dynamic and intentional pedagogical approach. It acknowledges children as active participants in their own learning while recognising the teacher's professional responsibility to design rich environments, provide appropriate scaffolding, and ensure equitable participation. By valuing play as both reflective and transformative, teachers create conditions in which children can grow holistically building a strong foundation for lifelong learning.