

Play

Introduction

Children learn in many different ways; the methods they use to help them learn are as important as what they learn. Play is an effective and valuable approach to learning. The government document 'The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework' 2014, states:

Each area of learning and development must be implemented through planned, purposeful play and through a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity. Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, to think about problems, and relate to others. Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play which is guided by adults. There is an ongoing judgement to be made by practitioners about the balance between activities led by children, and activities led or guided by adults. Practitioners must respond to each child's emerging needs and interests, guiding their development through warm, positive interaction. As children grow older, and as their development allows, it is expected that the balance will gradually shift towards more activities led by adults, to help children prepare for more formal learning, ready for Year 1.

Children's play is their work. It is necessary for mental health and full growth. Structured play requires mental and physical effort, self determination and self organisation. Play helps children learn about themselves and other people. It helps children to express themselves clearly, so other children and adults can understand them. Play develops imagination and creativity. It extends problem solving skills, encouraging children to ask why things happen and how things work. Young children are developing at a fast rate, and learn through movement and bodily involvement in everything that goes on around them.

Settings in which children play and learn

Domestic Play

This reflects everyday experiences of home, family and occupations. Children take on roles and develop awareness of the appropriate way to interact with people. They develop personal and social skills and language.

Constructive Play

This involves making things and taking things apart - often using building blocks. It helps children develop fine manipulative skills and to understand materials. It promotes hand/eye co-ordination, also control and balance. Children learn a range of mathematical concepts such as size, shape, number, sequencing, comparing, measuring and estimating. Children engage in intentional activity, helping them persevere and achieve.

Outdoor Play

This is just as important as indoor play. It offers scope for exploration and experimentation in movements. Children develop co-ordination, balance and spatial awareness. Fresh air, the weather and observations of the outdoor world promote children's wonder in nature, and knowledge of manmade features of the environment.

Sand Play

Children come to understand mathematical and scientific concepts relating to capacity, measures, and filtration. Sand is a valuable learning material. There is no right way to use sand; children can try out ideas without fear of getting it wrong. When children are free from worry they can develop confidence in their own ability to learn. Sand is often used imaginatively as a means of creating situations in miniature using small people, animals, stones, twigs, etc.

Water Play

Children again explore and investigate at their own level. They explore mathematical and scientific concepts such as floating and sinking. Water aids language development such as 'full' and 'empty'. Children also use problem solving skills through, for example, finding out how many small containers fill a large container.

Dough and Clay

These are enjoyable manual materials that give scope for thinking and learning. Young children's thinking is rooted in practical experience. Clay and dough is satisfying to handle and can be pulled, squeezed, rolled, pressed, shaped, smoothed, marked, poked, prodded and pounded. Children see immediately the effect of their actions and their fascination starts them thinking and talking. Gradually they develop their ability to predict, question, wonder: if, why, whether, and to imagine and to reason. Sometimes it is best not to ask children to make pots or models as this can hinder their own thinking, initiative and self esteem. Instead we join in their activity and can offer interest, encouragement and conversation.

Collage

Scrap materials are provided in a range of shapes, sizes and textures that can be used in many ways. By using materials in their own way children are learning through thinking. By thinking for themselves and trying to work things out they are developing their minds. Children's work with scrap materials often looks messy, peculiar and unrecognisable to us but young children don't set out to 'make something' but 'to do'. The important part of the activity is the thinking that goes on in their heads. If allowed to think for themselves their minds will develop, later being able to learn quicker and solve problems set before them.

Food

The main aim is to use food and the experience of exploring food as a means of furthering a child's general development. Working with food helps develop children's mathematical ability. Ideas about weight, capacity, length, time, money and shape are all met using food. Through working with food children observe, hypothesise, remember, predict, reason, problem solve and imagine. Children need adults to help them to talk about and reflect upon their work in order to develop thinking abilities. Making shopping lists, looking at labels on packaging, finding ingredients, all help children realise the purpose and importance of print and writing. Food has links with home; since shopping, preparing and eating food are a daily part of home life. Nursery can therefore provide comfortable familiarity. Interest can be stimulated by visiting places outside the nursery and by bringing in people and objects of interest. Foods from different cultures can be introduced, to extend knowledge and understanding of others.

Paper, Pencils and Crayons

Children need lots of time to scribble and to make marks on paper using crayons, pencils and felt tips. If given freedom to do this, their natural ability will develop until they are able to hold and control a pencil and make marks they intend. Being allowed to scribble doesn't hold back development because it is impossible for children to make progress without working through these vital stages. A child using random marks and squiggles as writing to say something on paper shows much more understanding than by being able to copy letter shapes without realising that a meaning is involved. Peculiar squiggle will gradually begin to contain letter shapes. Help with the correct way to form these letters can usually be offered to the child who, through freedom from pressure, has become interested and confident.

Paint

Young children don't paint pictures, they simply *use* paint. They mix it, spread it, make splodges, dabs and lines. They need lots of experience for a long time. Using paint in a thoughtful, systematic way, developing concepts of space, line, shape and colour all concern maths ideas. Look out for a child's big interest of the moment: perhaps straight lines, circles, joining up dots, or covering up. These and many other basic ideas are important to a child's understanding of the world around them. Doing is the most interesting and of value to a child. Often the end result is not important to them. Later on a child's picture will be someone or something. A child's painting is a way for him/her to understand or come to terms with people, things and events which interest or concern him/her. Paintings may look peculiar or unfinished to us, but showing a child how to paint, or asking them to finish their painting doesn't help; they think there is a right way and soon lose confidence in their own ability.

Conclusion

Finally, children *need* to play. Without this basic start to education they would not have the foundations necessary to build upon later in their schooling. Therefore, nursery is a crucial beginning, the first step to success along a challenging road of education.

