

Play and Development

Self-Guided Learning Package

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About Self-Guided Learning Packages

Self-Guided Learning Packages can be completed in your own time and convenience and offer an alternative to attending training sessions. This package aims to develop skills and knowledge that will be valuable to you in providing quality education and care programs. Packages are often used for professional development by staff teams, networks and other groups of children's services professionals. You can work through the package with colleagues by reading the package together, discussing the information and collaborating to complete the one assessment task.

Gowrie Victoria Leadership and Learning Consultants are available to support you while working through the package. Feel free to phone or email if you require any assistance completing the tasks within the package. Phone 1800 103 670 (freecall) or (03) 9347 6388 or email psc@gowrievictoria.org.au

Play and Development

You have chosen to complete the 'Play and Development' package. The aim of this package is to understand the importance of play in enhancing children's development. The package also enables the learner to develop appropriate ways of supporting children's physical, creative and life skills within Early Childhood Education and Care services.

Introduction

'Play provides opportunities for children to learn as they discover, create, improvise and imagine. When children play with other children they create social groups, test out ideas, challenge each other's thinking and build new understandings. Play provides a supportive environment where children can ask questions, solve problems and engage in critical thinking. Play can expand children's thinking and enhance their desire to know and to learn. In these ways play can promote positive dispositions towards learning. Children's immersion in their play illustrates how play enables them to simply enjoy being' (EYLF, 2009, p. 15).

Play is an opportunity for children to enhance their development through planned and spontaneous experiences. Children's services can provide children with a relaxed environment in which they can initiate their own play and participate in a range of activities that support the development of physical, creative and life skills.

'Early childhood educators take on many roles in play with children and use a range of strategies to support learning. They engage in sustained shared conversations with children to extend their thinking. They provide a balance between child led, child initiated and educator supported learning' (EYLF, 2009, p. 15).

Educators working in Children's Services need to understand the value of play in order to provide relevant and meaningful experiences for children.

Self Help Question 1

Reflect on your own experiences of play and list ten words that you feel best describe the meaning of play

Value of play

'Children's learning is dynamic and holistic. Physical, social, emotional, personal, spiritual, creative, cognitive and linguistic aspects of learning are all intricately interwoven and interrelated. Play is a context for learning that:

- *Allows for the expression of personality and uniqueness*

- *Enhances dispositions such as curiosity and creativity*
- *Enables children to make connections between prior experiences and new learning*
- *Assists children to develop relationships and concepts*
- *Stimulates a sense of wellbeing’ (FSAC, 2011, p. 7).*

Play provides children with many opportunities to develop new skills and express themselves through a variety of mediums, to belong, be and become. As children engage in play, they continuously learn about themselves, others and the world around them. Play is a valuable experience for children as it enables them to;

- Express themselves
- Be independent
- Develop and use self help skills
- Explore and discover
- Use imagination and creativity
- Develop problem solving skills
- Interact with others and develop social skills
- Use and practice language
- Practise emerging skills
- Engage in child-initiated experiences
- Make decisions
- Resolve conflict
- Share their identity and experiences
- Build self esteem
- Experience challenge

The value of play is often determined by the conditions of play and who is involved. The social contexts of children’s play have a significant influence on what children learn and develop through play. ‘All children, with support, can develop a strong sense of self and learn to interact with others with care, empathy and respect’ (VEYLDF, 2009, p. 18). The support of a responsive educator can enhance children’s play experiences by assisting children to value diversity and challenging bias.

Self Help Question 2

From your observations, list six other benefits children gain from play.

How have you supported children in play? Give one example _____

Although it is easy to recognise when children and individuals are involved in play, it is often difficult to define the real meaning of play. As it represents many things to each person, it is often described in different ways.

Neumann (in Dockett and Fler, 1999) suggests the following attributes are essential to play,

- internal motivation
- internal control
- internal reality

Fromberg (in Dockett and Fler, 1999) describes a range of characteristics that are typically evident in play,

- symbolic
- meaningful
- active
- pleasurable
- voluntary
- rule-governed
- episodic

Bateson (in Dockett and Fler, 1999) also describes play as a 'framed event' in which all participants are aware and understand that the play is about 'pretending'. He goes on to suggest that a play event is also characterised by various communication styles and gestures that are a unique part of the play itself. This can be easily seen in children's play as they take on different roles, voices and body language to act out their play.

Self Help Question 3

How do these definitions of play relate to your ideas about play? Refer to your answers in **Self Help Question 1**

Developmental stages of play

Our understanding of the way children grow and develop has largely been determined by a range of theories and ideas related to developmental psychology. Children's play has been described by several theorists according to particular developmental areas. Piaget and Smilansky focused on the cognitive aspects of play while Parten focused on the social aspects. Each of these approaches provides a different perspective from which children's play can be observed and supported.

Cognitive approach (Piaget, Smilansky)

Functional play tends to dominate the play of very young children as they use objects and actions repeatedly to practise emerging skills.

Constructive play usually involves the use of materials and equipment to construct something known during play, e.g. a block tower.

Symbolic play is often evident in pretend play as children use objects and symbols to represent something real in their play. As children get older, this play often becomes more social and may involve groups of children.

Games with rules are usually played by preschoolers and school-age children. These games are more formal and tend to have defined rules that have been predetermined by the group.

Social approach (Parten)

Unoccupied play is most commonly demonstrated by babies as they rarely seek to enter the play of other children.

Onlooker play can be observed when very young children choose to watch the play of others but with little or no direct involvement in the play.

Solitary play involves children playing by themselves with no interaction with those around them.

Parallel play occurs when children play alongside each other and may be using the same materials or objects. However the children rarely interact with each other during the play.

Associative play is the beginning of play with others who are using the same materials and equipment. In this play there are no defined roles or plans within the play.

Co-operative play involves children playing together cooperatively in groups. Children usually take on specific roles and are working towards achieving similar goals and plans.

Self Help Question 4

Provide an example of children involved in the following types of play:

Cooperative play

Games with rules

The educator role in children's play

'Educators actively support the inclusion of all children in play and leisure activities. They also help children to recognise when play is unfair and offer constructive ways to build a caring, fair and inclusive community.' (FSAC, 2011, p. 14)

Educators play an important role in facilitating and supporting children's play. As well as providing appropriate experiences, educator interactions with children are vital in assisting them to develop positive social behaviour and new skills during play. Educators can also provide encouragement and help children build self-esteem.

Educators can support children's play in the following ways:

- **Invite children to choose their own play experiences.** Provide a variety of interesting materials, equipment and props and allow children to decide which ones to explore and use during play. Encourage children to contribute their ideas when planning the program.
- **Children determine how long they will play.** Avoid pushing children to continue with activities they have lost interest in or interrupting them before they have really finished a task, project or play experience.
- **Provide experiences and materials that challenge various skill levels.** This ensures the child won't become easily bored or frustrated with an experience. Add more complex and challenging materials as children become more capable. This enables children to use their developing skills in meaningful ways.
- **Ensure the physical environment, materials and equipment is safe.** It is essential to frequently check materials and equipment for safety hazards. Developing a risk analysis for activities and the equipment used as well as the level of supervision required is important to ensure the safety of all the children. Always ensure materials are appropriate to children's skill levels and support is provided when new challenges or skills arise.
- **Focus on the process, not the product.** Encourage children's efforts and avoid comparing children or doing tasks for them. Avoid providing examples of finished products or expecting children to create the same 'product'.
- **Ensure children have the freedom to be messy.** Show children it is okay to be involved in messy play and encourage families to be aware of the value of messy play.
- **Participate when needed, observe when not.** Support and encourage children's play without excessive intervention. Supporting children to control their own play ensures they are gaining the maximum benefits from play.
- **Be sensitive and responsive to children's play.** Your interest, enthusiasm and encouragement will reinforce children's self-motivation and pride in their play.
- **Encourage children to solve problems and think divergently.** Avoid interfering or offering your own solutions. Invite children to explore solutions and learn from mistakes. Encourage children to support each other and seek assistance from their peers.
- **Help children to establish and maintain limits during play.** Provide positive and consistent guidance.

Child Initiated Play

A high quality Children's Service offers children a 'balance between child led, child initiated and educator supported learning' (EYLF, 2009, p. 15). Child initiated play can be described as any play that is determined and controlled by children. It is free from adult direction and is motivated by children's interests. Children should be free to choose materials and equipment that suit their interests and skills, devise their own games and play, and modify existing and familiar activities. They should also be able to participate in a range of appropriate experiences that promote physical health, creativity and the development of relevant life skills. 'They recognise their agency, capacity to initiate and lead learning, and their rights to participate in decisions that affect them, including their learning,' (EYLF, 2009, p. 9).

A well balanced program offers children suitable materials and equipment in the following areas of play, as well as allowing children to initiate their own play in these areas;

- Sport and physically active play
- Construction and games

- Art and craft
- Dramatic and imaginative play
- Music and movement
- Sensory play
- Science, maths and technology (including cooking, nature and environmental experiences and information technologies)
- Language and literacy experiences
- Clubs and interest groups
- Life skills

Play areas can be set up within the environment or adapted to meet the specific requirements of services that utilise a shared space. Although older children may prefer to play in groups, it is important to offer children opportunities and areas to play alone and in pairs. All experiences, materials and equipment should be based on the children’s needs, interests and abilities. When planning a high quality program the input of children should be actively sought to develop a collaborative program that is inclusive and responsive to their interests. When children can initiate their own play within a well planned environment, they are more likely to be engaged in meaningful and relevant experiences. Child initiated play also minimises inappropriate behaviour as children are using their time to explore and develop their own interests. These interests can be extended to create individual and group projects within the service.

Self Help Question 5

How do you encourage children’s agency, involvement and input within the service?
List four examples

Supporting Physical Development

Children’s physical development is crucial to their overall health and well being. When a child learns or masters a new physical skill, their sense of competence and confidence increases. The opportunity to participate in physical play enables children to enhance their coordination, balance, flexibility, strength, endurance and specific fine and gross motor skills.

Most children will develop physical skills on their own, however receiving encouragement and support for their efforts helps them to feel proud of their accomplishments and enhances their self esteem. Adults can also help them to accept their strengths and work on areas that need improvement.

A high quality children’s service can actively support children’s development in the following ways:

- Providing flexible space, time and opportunities for children to engage in planned and spontaneous play indoors and outdoors
- Encouraging children when they are learning new skills and providing assistance as needed
- Allow children to take risks in a safe supervised environment

- Providing a variety of materials and equipment that encourage skills development, alone and with others
- Providing appropriate equipment to minimise frustration and help children feel a sense of achievement
- Introducing new games and experiences that develop and challenge skills.
- Supporting children to become involved in play
- Accepting different levels of participation
- Accepting children’s agency
- Being responsive to cultural practices that may affect a child’s ability and opportunity to participate
- Encouraging children to support and appreciate the efforts and accomplishments of others
- Actively seeking the input and ideas of children regarding activities and materials
- Using daily routines as an opportunity to practise skills
- Encouraging children to use their skills in different ways
- Encouraging children to keep track of their own progress, rather than comparing themselves to others
- Being sensitive and responsive to the varying interests and skills of each child
- Providing open ended materials and equipment that children can explore in different ways
- Ensuring children have space to rest and relax
- Providing healthy, nutritious snacks and water to promote healthy eating habits
- Observing and planning for each child using the approved frameworks
- Reflecting on the child’s learning and the practices of the educator and service in supporting each child
- Promoting and modelling positive eating habits, involvement in activities and good OH&S practices.

Educators working in children’s services should encourage children to enjoy play without fear of failure or rejection. Regardless of their skill level, every child should feel good about their own capabilities and involvement in active play. Educators need to show genuine interest and enthusiasm in children’s development of skills, and actively role model a positive and flexible attitude towards physical health. ‘To support children’s learning, it is essential that educators attend to children’s wellbeing by providing warm, trusting relationships, predictable and safe environments.’ (EYLF, 2009, p. 30)

Self Help Question 6

Describe three regular experiences and/or opportunities at your service that support physical development.

How do you support the children in making appropriate decisions regarding participation? Describe a particular situation.

Supporting the Development of Life Skills

‘Over time and with opportunity and support, the ways in which children connect and participate with others increase’ (VEYLDF, 2009, p. 20).

As children grow and develop, it is important that educators provide them with opportunities to engage in experiences that develop social and self help skills. These skills enhance children’s confidence as they equip them with the necessary tools to tackle everyday problems and become socially competent.

Educators can promote the development of life skills in the following ways;

Social skills:

- Providing opportunities for children to make decisions about the service, including experiences, equipment, routines and limits.
- Promoting the use of considerate, respectful and positive communication.
- Encouraging socially acceptable behaviour.
- Encouraging children’s agency
- Encouraging children to be leaders and take on responsibility within the service.
- Encouraging children to consider the consequences of their actions for themselves and others.
- Encouraging children to cooperate and collaborate with each other.
- Encouraging children to develop and use conflict resolution skills.
- Providing children with opportunities for safe risk taking.
- Encouraging children’s involvement in the local and wider community.
- Encouraging social responsibility.

Self Help Skills:

- Encouraging children’s involvement in routine tasks, e.g. food preparation.
- Encouraging children to dress themselves.
- Encouraging children to go to the toilet independently.
- Encouraging children to be responsible for their belongings.
- Providing children with more challenging and complex tools and materials as their skills increase.
- Encouraging children to develop problem-solving techniques

Self Help Question 7

Describe how your children’s service encourages the development of social skills. List three examples.

Describe how your service encourages the development of self help skills. List three examples

Supporting Creative Development

Creativity is often associated with being talented in an area of the arts such as music, dance, drama or visual arts. However, being creative is also about being imaginative, innovative, resourceful, solving problems and thinking in different ways. A high quality children's service offers children many opportunities to be creative in the arts as well as other areas of the program such as language, science, maths and technology. When children have opportunities to engage in creative play, they develop new skills, learn to solve problems and think divergently. These skills help children to feel good about themselves and develop as a unique individual.

Aesthetic awareness is fostered when children focus on the sensory qualities of the world around them by doing, feeling and responding to things. This enables children to develop an appreciation for beauty, a sense of wonder and a personal sense of what is pleasing to them. As this will be quite different for each individual, it is important to encourage children to respect the choices and likes of others.

Self Help Question 8

Using your own creativity, think of three ways to make a sandwich without using bread

Educators working in Children's Services can encourage the creativity and aesthetic awareness of children in the following ways:

- Provide open-ended materials such as junk/recycled or natural materials that can be used in many ways
- Ensure children have opportunities to initiate their own play
- Encourage children to express their ideas and feelings using a variety of mediums, e.g. visual arts, language, dance, drama, music
- Provide sensory experiences such as water, clay and sand
- Provide a rich and varied environment that is inviting and aesthetically pleasing
- Arrange the environment so children can explore, discover, be messy and have space to create
- Set up interest areas that match children's skills levels and current interests
- Make materials and equipment easily accessible so children can select, replace and care for them without educator assistance

- Provide adequate storage for projects so that children can continue to work over several days or weeks.
- Make materials and experiences available for several days or weeks so children can explore them fully or extend them
- Surround children with examples of their own work.
- Allow children to choose the work they want displayed, and how and where it will be displayed
- Encourage brainstorming and problem-solving
- Ask open-ended questions and encourage children to think about things in different ways
- Encourage original ideas, thoughts and expressions
- Be responsive and sensitive to children’s ideas and suggestions
- Value the work and individuality of each child
- Encourage children to respect and value the work of others.
- Encourage children to take risks, learn from their mistakes and try again
- Model creativity by solving problems and sharing your own interests and skills
- Encourage the children to sometimes use technology when creating, such as computers, cameras, etc
- Allow children to choose and suggest activities that they would like to do

Self Help Question 9

Describe three situations when you recently encouraged the development of creativity and aesthetic awareness in children

As children grow, they are more likely to conform to the ideas of others. Adults have a vital role to play in encouraging children to express themselves as a unique individual. When children can choose from a range of open-ended materials they are able to make choices about how to use these materials. This encourages curiosity, problem-solving and the use of imaginative skills, and enables children to be creative in ways that match their developing skills and interests. Educators working in children’s services need to consider ways to provide open-ended materials that are safe and accessible for all children to use.

‘The degree of creativity and the possibility of discovery are directly proportional to the number and kind of materials in it’ (Greenman, 1998, p. 107).

Children are naturally curious about their world. Children’s services and the resources provided within the program ‘can also emphasise accountability for a sustainable future and promote children’s understanding about their responsibility to care for the environment, day to day and for long term sustainability’ (FSAC, 2011, p. 15).

Recycled / Junk Materials are waste materials that other people no longer have a use for, but have the potential to be reused in a variety of ways for play.

Junk /recycled materials can support creative development in many ways, for example:

- Materials can be used in a variety of ways, limited only by imagination
- Children enjoy arranging and rearranging material from the ‘real’ world

- Materials can be used in conjunction with other equipment to provide more challenging and interesting experiences
- When combinations of materials are changed frequently, exploration and discovery are stimulated
- Co-operation and sharing of ideas is often enhanced when children are free to arrange and explore materials together
- Dramatic play is enhanced as children take on a role relevant to the environment they have made
- Used carefully, the provision of these materials helps to maintain and expand children's interests and ideas
- Children can learn about the importance of recycling and caring for the natural environment.

Junk materials can also be obtained cheaply or at no cost at all from opportunity shops and waste depots, and may be donated by local businesses or families.

Natural Materials are materials that are found in the natural environment and not made by humans

Commercially produced toys and equipment are often made from artificial materials such as plastic. Educators often choose these toys because they are durable, brightly coloured and easily cleaned. Children who only play with these toys are missing out on important sensory experiences and learning opportunities. Element 3.2.2 of the Guide to the National Quality Standard (2010, p. 61) tells us of the importance of having a wide range of 'real, commercial, natural, recycled and simple home made materials to support their [children's] learning in a range of ways.'

Children of all ages need to have experiences in the natural world:

- To begin to feel a sense of belonging and responsibility for the world of living things, plants and animals
- To become aware of life around them. When you care for and show respect for all life, children will 'catch' your attitudes.

You can begin to develop a collection of natural materials from easily found materials in the outdoor environment such as shells, pebbles, rocks, twigs, leaves, feathers, tree bark, gum nuts and seed pods (be sure to check if these are poisonous or too small for little fingers!) Larger log sections also make great outdoor play materials too.

Other additional aesthetically pleasing materials could include:

- Cloths and fabrics. Many fabrics are made from plant or animal fibres – cotton, wool, linen, silk. You can find suitable fabrics for use in children's play in your home – old scarves, curtains and leftover scraps of material.
- Dolls: small knitted dolls, wooden carved dolls, peg dolls, cloth dolls, corn husk dolls; rope dolls make interesting changes from commercially produced dolls.
- Animals: small wooden animals from different countries or soft knitted/fabric animals.
- Blocks: sanded wooden off-cuts make a change from commercially produced blocks.
- Boxes: shoe boxes, grocery boxes and packing boxes are great fun for imaginative play.
- Cane baskets: these come in a great variety of shapes and sizes and can be used for dramatic play or storing materials.

Conclusion

Play provides children with many opportunities to master developing skills and learn about the world around them and their place in their community. Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care services have a vital role to play in creating a relaxed environment where children are free to use their agency: to pursue their own interests and participate in engaging planned experiences. This balance of planned and spontaneous experiences enables children to improve their skills, use their curiosity, explore their creative skills and develop life skills for the real world. When responsive educators encourage and support children during play, their learning and enjoyment can be greatly enhanced. This, in turn, helps the children to feel good about their abilities and accomplishments and leads to a healthy self-esteem and positive self concept.

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Assessment Task

TASK 1

Write a report (approximately 500 words) discussing the value of child-initiated play that could be included in the service's newsletter. The report needs to cover the following aspects:

- Value of child-initiated and child-led play
- How child-initiated and child-led play is offered in the service
- The role of the educator in supporting child-initiated and child-led play
- Consultation with children about their play and learning

TASK 2

1. Provide three examples of experiences and/or opportunities that support the development and curiosity of children in your service. Describe how each of these examples supports the development and curiosity of children.
2. Provide three examples of experiences and/or opportunities that support the creative and aesthetic development of children in your service through the use of a range of materials, including natural and recycled materials. Describe how each of these examples supports the children to make choices and explore.
3. Provide three examples of experiences and/or opportunities that support the development of life skills for children at your service. Describe how each of these examples supports the development of life skills in children.