

Let's play

Learning through play

A new school year, and a sea of new faces in front of you as junior infants set out on their big adventure. New places bring exciting experiences for these small school-goers. Sometimes these experiences are strange and daunting but they don't need to be. As infant teachers, one thing we know about 4, 5 and 6 year olds is that they love to play. And what better way to support their learning than through play?

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What? Play with 30 infants in my classroom? How will I organise it so that total chaos won't reign? What will their parents think? Or maybe you are worried that if they play all day instead of working they won't be learning? In many respects play is a child's work, and if you take it seriously, then children and their parents will also value it.

As teachers we don't need convincing of the value of play in early childhood education. Play is the cornerstone of early learning and is a child's right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992). The *Primary School Curriculum* and the *Framework for Early Learning* (soon to be completed) both highlight play as a natural way for children to learn. In addition to this, as part of the *Framework for Early Learning*, the NCCA commissioned a background paper on *Play as a context for early learning and development*. This paper, which is available to download from www.ncca.ie/publications, highlights the critical importance of play, both indoors and outdoors, for children's holistic development. The paper also cites children's views on the subject. When asked about play, children talk about the importance of having fun, being with friends, freely choosing activities, playing with open-ended materials and being outdoors.

As a teacher you have a very important role to play in supporting and extending children's learning through play. Remember:

→ Play and first-hand experiences are important for children's well-being.

- Play helps children to make connections and to make sense of their experiences and their world.
- Through play, children build on and extend at school what they have learned at home, at their childminder's and/or early years setting.
- Relationships and language are key components of play.
- What children learn is connected to where, how and with whom they learn. Play in classrooms varies depending on the environment, the children, their families, their social and cultural background and on you – their teacher. Your attitudes, beliefs and teaching styles influence children and their play.

- Children need to experience a variety of different types of play in order to develop to their full potential. We provide some ideas on the different types of play later in the article.
- Having a mix of adult-initiated and child-initiated play activities is important; being able to choose and initiate activities through free play is important.
- Children need to play as individuals, in pairs, in small groups and occasionally in a large group.

This article provides suggestions for organising your classroom and for shaping learning activities and experiences so that you can capitalise on children's love of and need for play.



Making play part of your daily routines and activities

Play, especially with larger groups of children or in a multi-class situation, requires careful organisation. Below are some practical ideas which might help.

- If space is tight, divide the children into small groups. Have only one group painting or playing with the sand/water at a time. Rotate activities on a daily/weekly/fortnightly basis.
- Make the most of all the pairs of hands that are available to you – parents, people on work experience, transition year students. Extra help really extends play opportunities.
- Divide your room into interest areas or corners for example messy/art/junk area, pretend area, quiet/library area, music and movement area, construction area. Boundaries can be set by using low shelves or dividers. Label areas with photos and, if possible, written signs in the languages of all the children in the class.
- Add new and interesting equipment/materials regularly. This doesn't have to be costly. Rolls of wall paper are great for painting! Recycle household items for the pretend area – a broken hairdryer with the lead cut off, a real measuring tape, an old tea or coffee pot. Buy some baby clothes from the charity shop. Think safety! Check for rough or pointed edges and loose parts or buttons.
- Children need to play indoors and outdoors. Why not move some activities outside? What about painting outdoors or creating an outdoor café for role-play? Most of the things you do inside can also be done outside (even in cold weather) – P.E., group art projects, playing with the sand, developing an infants' garden, searching for mini beasts. More space means more fun.
- Make tidying-up after play easier for everyone by always storing things in the same place, in areas that are accessible to the children. Use storage boxes and baskets, and clearly label with pictures and words (again in the languages of all the children). Make tidying-up part of the learning experience by singing a tidy-up song or by counting the boxes that are being filled.

The tables on the right outline some of the types of play children enjoy, along with ideas for organising activities.

Types of play	Links to the Primary School Curriculum	What equipment/resources do I need to provide for the different types of play?	What do I need to do to promote the different types of play?	How can I involve parents?	Sample activities/experiences
Pretend/imaginary/role/fantasy/small world play	Language Mathematics SPHE SESE Arts education	Props from home (real kitchen equipment, a mirror), restaurant, flower shop, office (old mobile phones), post office, travel agents, hospital equipment Dress up clothes Dolls, puppets, soft toys Small world materials – people, cars, animals, train sets. Culturally diverse materials-cooking utensils, food packages, clothes.	Observe and take part when invited or when you can make a positive contribution. Build on, don't direct. Extend and change around the props so that different scenarios can happen. Make sure all children feel included and see their family/community experiences reflected.	Ask them for props. Tell them what is going on and what children are learning. Take photos and write stories about the play that children can take home. Invite parents in to talk about their jobs – farmer, fire-fighter, nurse, lollipop person, chip-shop owner.	Set up a shoe shop with different shoes, money, a cardboard measure. Children can measure feet, count money, try on different shoes. Create a doctor's surgery/hospital. Children can take on roles such as doctor, nurse, patient, ambulance driver, pharmacist and learn about people in the community who help us. Introduce different food packets and cooking utensils into the home area and invite children to set up a restaurant. They can take orders, set the table, cook and serve the food, collect the money or be server, diner or cook. Help children to make a space ship with a big box and lots of junk materials. Children can then use it to pretend they are in space, introducing them to the solar system, different galaxies and stars and so on.

<p>Play with natural materials</p>	<p>Language Mathematics SPHE SESE Arts Education</p>	<p>Sand, water, stones, leaves, twigs, lentils, cornflower, pasta, flowers, grass, feathers, clay, dough, wood Equipment to pour, measure, cut, manipulate, scoop, fill, pretend with, build with, make shapes with. Containers of same and different sizes/shapes. Things to smell, taste, touch and listen to.</p>	<p>Know the natural resources/amenities that are available locally. Take photos of them and talk to the children about them. Go on local trips. Ensure that children have the chance to play with sand and water regularly (at least once a week). Model using materials and describe the colours and textures in both English and Irish. Try to find out the words in the home languages of all the children in the class.</p>	<p>Tell them about the importance of experiencing nature and natural materials. Ask them to extend what you are doing in school by going on a nature walk, bringing things in from their own garden. Invite parents to come in to talk about bee-keeping, fishing, gardening, farming.</p>	<p>Ask the children to bring in lots of natural materials - moss, stones, twigs - and empty tomato boxes. In small groups ask the children to work together to make a miniature garden. Provide lots of pasta shapes and paint, glitter, glue and so on. The children can make jewellery or small models from the pasta shapes after they have painted them. The shells can also be used as counters or as pretend money.</p>
<p>Physical/Gross and fine motor skills Manipulative/ Constructive play</p>	<p>Language Mathematics SPHE PE</p>	<p>Hoops, ropes, bean bags, balls, balancing beams, blocks, boxes, threading beads, jig-saws, large and small construction materials, zips, buttons, table top activities, matching games, games with rules, bingo/lotto games, sorting sets, interlocking bricks, pegboards, magnets, dominoes, giant snakes and ladders/hop scotch to play outdoor. (These could even be painted on the school playground).</p>	<p>Play with children actively inside and outside. Let them see you moving - stretching, marching, running. Grade activities so that all children experience success. Use games to reinforce new language and new concepts as well as physical skills.</p>	<p>Have a sports day every term and invite parents to help out. Provide handouts of exercises/ activities that can be done at home - activities that involve gross motor skills like dancing, running or fine motor skills like balancing, cutting, threading.</p>	<p>Set up an obstacle course where children have to do a series of activities - running, crawling through boxes, catching small bean bags, jumping over small hurdles. Play different types of music and ask child to move to the beat or play musical statues/musical chairs Ask children to sort blocks into sets of two or three or to thread pasta onto a piece of string.</p>
<p>Creative play</p>	<p>Language SPHE SESE Arts Education</p>	<p>Variety of paints, brushes, sponges Musical instruments, items that make noise (babies' rattles, wind chimes, bells), Materials to make own musical instruments (plastic bottles, pebbles, biscuit tins) crayons, pencils, junk materials, stories, books, cardboard, props for drama/role play, clay, dough, empty boxes, finger paints, variety of paper of different colours, sizes and textures, scissors (left and right handed), computers, digital cameras.</p>	<p>Let children be messy and noisy. Encourage them to try new things - mixing paint, moving to music, miming, painting, dancing outdoors. Think of new ways to help children be creative - making a model of their local community, playing word games, extending a story that you begin.</p>	<p>Ask parents to come in to read a story, to help at painting/ messy play time, to play an instrument. Display work where parents can see it. Write children's explanations of pictures underneath.</p>	<p>Get some rolls of wall paper and provide lots of paint, feathers, art/junk material and ask children to make a group picture Do finger or foot painting Encourage children to mix paints to see what happens</p>