Research Digest

Standard 1 Rights of the Child

Ensuring that each child’s rights are met requires that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning.
Most discussions on the rights of the child focus on rights concerning provision and protection (Research Digest/Standards 9: Health and Welfare and 15: Legislation and Regulation) and tend to benefit from wide support. Participation rights – where the child is seen to have agency and power within her/his own life – are more controversial. This is due, primarily, to the different constructions and understandings of childhood. Social learning theory has come a long way from Locke’s conceptualisation of the child as an empty vessel or Bandura’s belief that imitation formed the basis of learning. Current theories on childhood are contextualist in their approach. That is, the child is not perceived as a constant, universal organism operating in a vacuum. Instead the mind is seen as inherently social, and so adult-child relations should be characterised by an interactionist approach (O’Dwyer, 2006).

The change in conceptions of childhood is reflected in international policy and legislation, most notably in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Convention details the special rights of children, including their right to participate in a democracy in ways that reflect their age and maturity. Articles 3 and 12 have particular relevance for ECCE provision: Article 3 states that the best interests of the child must be of paramount consideration in all actions concerning children, and Article 12 outlines how the child’s views must be considered and taken into account in all matters affecting her/him (United Nations [UN] General Assembly, 1989). Ensuring that these rights are met puts a duty on practitioners to enable every child to exercise choice, and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development. It means moving beyond simply safeguarding children’s rights, to actively promoting them.
Respecting children’s choices and decisions

Taking the time to talk and listen to children provides practitioners with a better understanding of what children are feeling, and can therefore provide deeper insight into their needs within the setting. Hart (2005) believes consultation with children has many additional functions, such as being:

- Central to the learning process
- Vital in relation to emotional development in very young children
- Healthy for the development and retention of positive self-esteem
- Important in gauging society’s views on early childhood and children
- Important in establishing continuity with the home
- An evaluation mechanism (through which the child’s view of service provision is gathered)

There are a range of approaches to consulting with children. The Mosaic approach, for example, brings together a range of methods for listening to young children’s perspectives about their lives. Using combinations of observation and participatory tools, children’s perspectives become the focus for an exchange of meanings between children, practitioners and parents (Clark et al., 2005). The strategic component within any approach to consulting with children is the acknowledgement that listening and talking to them is a central factor in their cognitive, linguistic, emotional and social development. Children benefit enormously from discussions with adults in which their views and opinions are attended to, responded to, taken seriously and acted upon (Kay, 200).

The National Children’s Strategy, Our Children, Their Lives (Department of Health and Children [DHC], 2000) was launched as a means to implement many of the articles in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). Based on a ‘whole child perspective’, the Children’s Strategy recognises that children have the capacity to shape their own lives and should, accordingly, be given a voice: ‘Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity’ (DHC, 2000:3). Hayes (2002) believes that this should be translated into practice by:

- Encouraging children to express their views
- Demonstrating a willingness to take the views expressed seriously
- Avoiding misunderstanding, by clearly setting out for the child the scope of such participation by them
- Providing children with sufficient information and support to enable them to express informed views
- Explaining the decisions taken, especially when the views of the child cannot be fully taken into account

Recent Research

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Most discussions on the rights of the child focus on rights concerning provision and protection (Research Digest/Standards 9: Health and Welfare and 5: Legislation and Regulation) and tend to benefit from wide support. Participation rights – where the child is seen to have agency and power within her/his own life – are more controversial. This is due, primarily, to the different constructions and understandings of childhood. Social learning theory has come a long way from Locke’s conceptualisation of the child as an empty vessel or Bandura’s belief that imitation formed the basis of learning. Current theories on childhood are contextualist in their approach. That is, the child is not perceived as a constant, universal organism operating in a vacuum. Instead the mind is seen as inherently social, and so adult-child relations should be characterised by an interactionist approach (O’Dwyer, 2006). The change in conceptions of childhood is reflected in international policy and legislation, most notably in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Convention details the special rights of children, including their right to participate in a democracy in ways that reflect their age and maturity. Articles 38 and 24 have particular relevance for ECCE provision: Article 38 states that the best interests of the child must be of paramount consideration in all actions concerning children, and Article 2 outlines how the child’s views must be considered and taken into account in all matters affecting her/him (United Nations [UN] General Assembly, 1989). Ensuring that these rights are met puts a duty on practitioners to enable every child to exercise choice, and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development. It means moving beyond simply safeguarding children’s rights, to actively promoting them.
In order to achieve balance in the discussion around children’s right to inclusion in decision-making processes, it is important to identify some of the barriers that may impede such participation. Fear of a loss of power from the adult’s perspective could represent an obstacle. Lansdown and Lancaster (2001:40) attribute this to the assumption that ‘...adults have the monopoly of expertise in determining outcomes in children’s lives’, and advocate that simple reliance on adults to promote the well-being of the child is an inadequate approach to caring for children. A second obstacle may lie in the belief that children make irrational, unfeasible decisions. The expertise of the practitioner is central to ensuring that this isn’t the case. An understanding of child development, for example, allows for inclusion and decision-making that is appropriate to the age and developmental stage of each child. For a baby, this may be something as basic as choosing between two playthings, or for an older child, it could be choosing meals, and so forth. The important factor within the interaction is that the level of choice is appropriate for the child. Time is also a potential barrier to consulting with children. Kay (2004) acknowledges that individual attention on a regular basis is an almost utopian concept in a busy ECCE setting, but stresses the fact that taking time to listen to young children may represent a step forward in their knowledge of the world around them. Regardless of the obstacles that appear (perceived or real), a supportive climate where collaboration between adults and children is encouraged is essential for learning. This involves active listening and reflection, in order to ‘...provoke, co-construct and stimulate children’s thinking and their collaboration with peers’ (French, 2007:27).

**Partnership with children**

“Practitioners face a challenge, to look upon children as experts on themselves and not that practitioners are all-powerful and know best...how could this fail to raise the level of any child’s self-esteem, creating an environment of trust and negotiation within the spirit of enquiry?” (Hart, 2005:206)

Though the adage that children ‘should be seen and not heard’ now seems archaic and outdated within ECCE, there is still a certain resistance in the consideration of children as partners. Promoting the rights of children through partnership, however, does not mean giving children a license to take complete control over what is happening within the setting. It is, as Lansdown and Lancaster (2001) concur, about moving away from the discredited assumption that adults alone can determine what happens in children’s lives, without consideration of children’s own views, experiences and preferences. It means that children, even very young ones, are entitled to be listened to and taken seriously. For this type of collaborative partnership to work, it is important that the setting recognises the importance of developing a culture and ethos of participation, and that each individual practitioner understands and acknowledges adult power and responsibilities within the adult-child relationship.

Kinney (2005:123) outlines some principles and values that should underpin any consideration of children as partners:

- **The rights of children should be respected** – this includes the right to be heard and to have their views taken into account

- **Adults must listen and respond** – it is important to ensure effective ways of supporting children to communicate their viewpoints

- **Participation takes time** – children benefit from a consistent experience of the process of consultation and participation, in order to fully understand both what is expected of them and the outcomes
An important part of children learning about the process of consultation is recognising and respecting the viewpoint of adults and other children (Research Digest/Standard: Identity and Belonging)

Consultation is not enough – the results of the consultation and how those discoveries influence practice are vitally important.

Acknowledging that children are rights-bearers rather than merely recipients of adult protective care raises a multitude of issues in adult relationships towards children (Lansdown and Lancaster, 2001). It does not, however, negate the fact that children have needs but argues that, accordingly, children have the right to have those needs met. This requires ensuring that each child is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning.

Implementing the Standard

Ensuring that each child’s rights are met involves providing the child with opportunities where she/he is enabled to take the lead, initiate activity, be appropriately independent and is supported to solve problems. For babies, this can mean providing routines to ensure that she/he gets regular and frequent individual attention, other than in response to distress or care needs. For children aged from twelve months onwards, the continuation of this individualised care is equally important. Practitioners should provide each child with opportunities within the daily routine to use her/his initiative and to be appropriately independent. This could be achieved through:

- Problem-solving opportunities that arise for the child in the course of the day’s activities and routines
- Providing challenges, as a matter of routine, where the child takes the lead and acts with appropriate levels of independence (e.g., tidying up after her/himself, choosing activities, selecting stories for reading time, etc.)
- Supporting and emphasising the success of situations when a child chooses, organises and takes the lead in an activity
- Supporting child-initiated activity for the child with a disability
- Providing opportunities for the child to care for her/his own belongings and those of the setting
- Enabling the child to take care of her/himself
- Using meal/snack and tidy-up times to encourage individual initiative in each child
There are also some questions that the practitioner should reflect upon when considering the child’s participation in the daily routine of the setting, in activities, in conversations and in all other appropriate situations:

- How is each child (including the child with special needs) enabled to participate with her/his peers?
- How are responsiveness and sensitivity towards the child demonstrated when engaged with her/him?
- How is it ensured that each child joins in the shared activities in a way that suits her/his own disposition?
- Are there challenges in considering the child as a partner?

For a child to actively engage in the daily activities of the setting, and for her/him to be empowered to make decisions and choices, the practitioner should achieve a balance between child-chosen (directed) and adult-chosen (directed) activity. This involves an understanding of child development, to ensure that the level of choice is appropriate for each child.

Conclusion

Rights have a pivotal role in improving the lives of children and reconstructing their position within society from that of passive dependants to that of active citizens. The child-related professions are being challenged in their perspectives – accustomed to making assumptions about the needs of children and what is best for them, ECCE policy-makers and providers need to recognise children as powerful and competent social actors (Smith, 2006).

Partnership between adults and children is a key component in ensuring that children are enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant in her/his own development and learning. The practitioner’s role lies in determining what is age and developmentally appropriate within that partnership. As Jans (2004:40) highlights

“…the citizenship of children is based on a continuous learning process in which children and adults are interdependent. In this interdependency, the playful ways in which children give meaning to their environment has to be taken into account.”

ECCE settings must ensure that each child has opportunities to make choices, is enabled to make choices, and has her/his choices and decisions respected. They need to ensure that each child has opportunities to take the lead, to initiate activity, to be appropriately independent, and to be supported in problem-solving. In such a domain, the rights of the child become the responsibility of the adult.
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Conclusion


Research Digest

Standard 6 Play

Promoting play requires that each child has ample time to engage in freely available and accessible, developmentally appropriate and well-resourced opportunities for exploration, creativity and ‘meaning making’ in the company of other children, with participating and supportive adults and alone, where appropriate.
Introduction

Play is one of the key contexts for children’s early learning and development, and offers significant opportunities for both learning and teaching.

“Play at its best in education situations, provides not only a real medium for learning but enables discerning and knowledgable adults to learn about children and their needs.” (Moyle 1989:xi)

The challenge for practitioners who work to support the young child’s learning and development is to engage with the child’s play in a way which enhances it and opens up new vistas of learning and fun.

In order for it to be enjoyable and beneficial, young children need to spend a significant amount of time within the setting engaged in play/exploration, and these and other playful activities should be central to the daily routine. An understanding of child development is central to the achievement of this, primarily as it provides a continuum on which the practitioner can determine what is developmentally appropriate in terms of play. While singing and rhyming may be used to engage in play with very young babies, for example, interactive story-time may be more developmentally appropriate for older children.

Another important feature of play is that it enables the child to explore, to be creative and to use her/his previous learning to make new meanings. Open-ended play items, for example, can be provided which lead the child to explore different properties in the environment, both indoor and outdoor.

The next section of the Research Digest considers these aspects of play and their relationship to quality practice, as well as providing research evidence around resourcing play and the importance of choice and interaction.
Play, learning and development

In play, children develop and demonstrate exploration, creativity, spirituality, imagination, experimentation, manipulation, expression of ideas, social and interaction skills, divergent and abstract thinking, and problem-solving capacities (Bruce, 2001). These skills are essential for the consolidation of learning and the construction of meaning and knowledge. Research has demonstrated that young children who are more engrossed in their free play (thereby demonstrating higher levels of motivation) manifest more cognitively sophisticated play than peers who are less engrossed. Furthermore, adults who demonstrate warmth and supportive responses positively influence task-directedness, organisation, sustained play activity and pride in personal achievement in young children (CECDE, 2005).

While children are biologically primed to play from birth, they need other people to trigger those biological processes (Bruce, 2001). Babies need sensitive adults who will not allow frustrations to develop. If the joy of play goes, it takes with it the potential for deep learning. Toddlers develop the capacity to engage in critical aspects of play; pretending, imagining, and creating props for play with role rehearsals. They begin to use symbols and develop mastery of new activities. Whereas struggle is an important feature of early learning, children who are always struggling will become reluctant learners if they do not get enough practice to gain the dexterity they need in order to enjoy what they have learnt. The enjoyment of writing stories has its roots in socio-dramatic play in which the child develops scenes with a story line and adventurous characters (Bruce, 2001). The literature further emphasises that ‘structured’ play should provide both security and intellectual challenge; these two factors are largely determined by the developmental appropriateness of the activities (CECDE, 2005). Children who learn actively from birth are more likely to have positive dispositions to learning. This has life long implications. These children are curious and interested in what they are doing and they experience fun, enjoyment and, with repetition, the probability of success. They develop competence and subsequent confidence. Open, optimistic, risk-taking and resilient, they are intrinsically motivated to learn (French, 2007).

Resourcing play

David et al. (2002) have noted the ‘one hundred languages’ that children use daily to share and communicate their ideas playfully. These include singing, dancing, talking, story-making, painting, mark-making, patterns, building, animating puppets and other playthings, model-making, gardening, looking after animals, and so forth. Such playful activity needs to be encouraged at all stages of the day and not confined to specific periods – even routine activities can be done playfully.

If play is to be seen as a process that will promote learning and development, it must be of high quality (In-Career Development Team, 1998). Lack of resources – in the form of appropriate equipment and high pupil:teacher ratios – can result in a gap between child-centred curriculum provision and its implementation (Murphy, 2004). High quality play is nurtured by adults providing a resource rich and aesthetically pleasing environment (indoors and outdoors) where children are able to touch, manipulate, explore, and experiment with a variety of materials. Socio-dramatic play can be supported by both specific materials such as a train set or dressing-up clothes, or more open-ended items such as blocks or big and small boxes. The latter are more...
likely to support more imaginative and complex play scripts (In-Career Development Team, 1998).

Play is an extensive pathway to learning and as such, professional knowledge and expertise is critical in planning and engaging in playing, learning and teaching (Murphy, 2004). This involves practitioners developing informed insights into the styles and patterns of learning for each child; her/his preferences, needs, identities, friendships and interests, and extending their own knowledge about pedagogical processes and curriculum. Play provides a lens into children’s minds, revealing meanings and patterns not evident in formal contexts. It can help practitioners to understand the meaning of play-based and child-initiated activities, to fine tune their provision, to help children to become master players and to inform the co-construction of the curriculum (Wood and Attfield, 2005). The skill of the practitioner lies in fusing the developmental needs of children with the concepts and values required for progression in any area of learning. Curriculum plans need to be reflected on daily, to identify, for example:

- What the children learned that day
- How the specific needs of children were addressed
- What special interests can be built upon
- How each child can be helped to experience success tomorrow

Materials and activities offered will consequently prove to be more diverse, challenging, appropriate to the context of development and enriching in generating critical skills (French, 2003).

**Choice and interaction**

The importance of activity and first hand experiences (where children can touch, smell and taste as opposed to looking at photographs or plastic replicas) in supporting children’s early learning and development is dependent on the adult’s role in providing for and enriching this activity. Children must have access to a range of stimulating materials and experiences. Adults should provide children with learning opportunities for responsible choice and independence. Babies need access to objects to explore and discover their weight, smell, texture, as well as colour, in a safe environment. The adult is in a position, having carefully laid out the objects and checked for safety, to facilitate the child’s exploration in freedom. Toddlers need more manipulative and creative materials, as well as equipment to climb, bounce on and slide down. Young children have increasing capacities for language and inquiry, a growing ability to understand another point of view, and are developing interests in representation and symbols, such as pictures, numbers and words, and are increasingly physically active (French, 2003).

The consensus in research has moved firmly towards learning and developing in collaboration with others, democracy between adult and child, as well as between child and child (French, 2007). Children are born as social beings whose social competence is enhanced through being and playing with others (Research Digest/Standard 14: Identity and Belonging). Manning-Morton and Thorp (2003) conclude that the adult is key in supporting play by:

- Developing appropriate and close relationships with continuity of care through key worker systems
Being emotionally present

Devising play experiences that support children’s understandings of relationships and feelings

Engaging in play sensitively and sharing care effectively with parents

Adults need to plan for play and the specific interactions required to appropriately scaffold children’s learning (French, 2007). Moyles and Adams (2002) identified that although adults endorsed the educational benefits of play, they were unsure of their role and how to assess the outcomes of play. While acknowledging the challenges for adults in participating in play, the evidence is clear that children can gain self-confidence, self-esteem and self-knowledge by engaging with and being supported by adults. Responsive adults enter their play as co-participants rather than ignoring, limiting the activity, having a pre-determined goal, redirecting children from their activities, interrupting or dominating an activity. Children do not require adults to become like large children, but to respect the play situation, honour the evolved rules and remain connected in the play. Children need time for individual exploration and reflection and for one-to-one interactions, which is critical for later literacy.

The play opportunities provided should support children’s freedom, imagination, social learning and cognitive learning equally. The most effective pedagogy is both ‘teaching’ and providing freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities; therefore a balance of child-initiated and adult-initiated learning should be ensured. In essence, the pleasure of play is the natural vehicle for integrated holistic development and learning (French, 2007).

Implementing the Standard

The opportunities for play/exploration provided for a child should mirror her/his stage of development, give the child the freedom to achieve mastery and success, and challenge the child to make the transition to new learning and development. In order to determine if this is being achieved, the reflective practitioner needs to consider:

- The type of play the child is currently engaging in – is it functional, constructive, symbolic, imaginative or socio-dramatic play?
- The range of opportunities provided for the child so that she/he can fully explore this type of play (appropriate environment, meaningful interactions, curriculum, etc.)
- Whether or not these opportunities are giving the child a sense of control and of being competent

Interactions (Research Digest/Standard 5: Interactions) are intrinsic to the relationship between play and learning and so, it is vital that each child has opportunities for play/exploration with other children, with participating and supportive adults and by themselves, where appropriate. To ensure that this is happening on a regular basis, the practitioner could reflect on the following:

- How often does she/he participate in play with the child?
- What form does her/his participation take?
What strategies can be used to support and enable the child who may have difficulties ‘gaining entry’ to and sustaining play with other children, or who may be consistently excluded from play?

Consider situations where a child may wish to play alone and how she/he may facilitate that or, conversely, determine it inappropriate

As evidenced by the research outlined in the previous section, play is not a discrete setting practice, but an extensive pathway to learning. As such, opportunities for play should not be ‘incidental’, but should be devised in conjunction with planning for curriculum/programme implementation. Furthermore, they should be adapted to meet changing learning and development requirements. Examples of how this may be achieved include:

Considering how planning for learning through play accommodates the individual child, setting, local context and specific needs (special needs, disadvantage, linguistic needs, and so forth)

Considering the frequency with which planning for play and curriculum/programme implementation is undertaken (daily, weekly, monthly or on a term basis)

The management and evaluation of documentation and planning

Conclusion

From preparation to participation, play is a central context for a child’s early learning and development. Children in the birth to six years age category are evolving their interpersonal skills. Considerable social learning is, therefore, involved in adapting to becoming part of a group (Research Digest/Standards 13: Transitions and 14: Identity and Belonging). Play/exploration needs to be an integral part of this learning process and should, accordingly, form a major part of a setting’s curriculum/programme.

The opportunities for play/exploration should be developmentally appropriate, while simultaneously challenging the child to make the transition to new learning and development. Play can, for example, facilitate imaginary worlds where new forms of social relations and new patterns of decision-making and power are explored.

If children are to become self-sufficient learners, they must recognise that they can use space and resources for themselves. To that end, each learning area and activity in the setting needs to have plenty of relevant equipment and materials for the child (Research Digest/Standard 2: Environments).

Acknowledging that play in the early years presents a basis for the evolution of learning, the reflective practitioner can ensure the centrality of play/exploration within quality practice by identifying children’s particular needs and appropriate adult responses. By doing so, the child is taught, supported and encouraged to engage in exploration, creativity and meaning-making processes in the company of other children, with participating and supportive adults and, where appropriate, alone.


Children’s Books