Age-appropriate pedagogies

Play-based learning

Play-based learning provides opportunities for children to actively and imaginatively engage with people, objects and the environment. Symbolic representation is a critical aspect. When playing, young learners may be organising, constructing, manipulating, pretending, exploring, investigating, creating, interacting, imagining, negotiating and making sense of their world. It promotes the holistic development (physical, social, emotional, cognitive and creative) of a child and depending on how it is utilised, may also support a broad range of literacy and numeracy skills.

Play-based learning is strongly connected to the development of self-regulation as young learners develop the skills of collaboration, to negotiate and to reach compromises, to share ideas and express opinions, to make and follow rules and to act with agency (Berk, Mann & Ogan, 2006). It is the degree of agency and capacity to make decisions that are central to the concept of play-based learning. 'To an observer, learners demonstrating choice are setting goals, developing and sharing ideas, making and changing rules and negotiating challenge. They are also likely to be choosing collaborators and roles' (Mardell, B., Wilson, D., Ryan, J., Ertel, K., Krechevsky, M., & Baker, M. 2016, p. 7). It is through play-based learning that young learners explore and apply knowledge and understandings as individuals and as part of a group.

An observer of play-based learning is likely to see young learners actively engaged in experiences where choice, wonder and delight is evident in their interactions.

Choice

Feels like... empowerment, autonomy, ownership, intrinsic motivation

Looks like... setting goals, challenges, purpose, sharing ideas, choosing collaborators and roles, active, negotiated, making and changing rules

Wonder

Feels like... curiosity, novelty, surprise, engagement, fascination, challenge

Looks like... improvising, inventing, pretending, trying, taking risks, learning from mistakes, exploring, creating, imagining, expressing excitement with music, movement, stories, languages, materials and ideas

Delight

Feels like... enjoyment, excitement, satisfaction, inspiration, pride, and belonging

Looks like... celebrating, focusing attention, smiling/laughter, anticipation and participation

(Adapted from Towards a pedagogy of play, 2016, p. 7)

Queensland Government

Teacher decision-making

When supporting play-based learning in early years classrooms teachers draw on combined knowledge of:

- young learners' interests and capabilities and dispositions to learning
- their own interests, skills, capabilities and philosophies
- the Australian Curriculum learning area content
- evidence of learning
- school and community contexts.

Key drivers of play-based learning

The key drivers that underpin play-based learning provide a framework for teachers to discuss the benefits of this approach with colleagues and parents. The capacity to articulate why a particular approach is used helps to reassure parents of the potential benefits for their child in terms of short-term and long-term educational outcomes. The key drivers also help to shape teachers' decisions in ways that support young learners' holistic development, a critical aspect of contemporary education (see *Age-appropriate pedagogies for the early years of schooling: Foundation paper*). Of note in play-based learning is a strong element of agency with young learners able to make decisions about the types of play that they wish to engage in, the roles and responsibilities they assume and the

modes of communication that they use to express their ideas (for example, drama, visual arts, digital technologies, construction materials). In the early years of schooling it is acknowledged that the degree of agency young learners experience in play-based learning is also shaped by the goals of the teacher in relation to the Australian Curriculum and assessment tasks.

Ownership of learning is shared: Play-based learning may be initiated and directed by young learners, the teacher or in collaboration with adult scaffolding.

Young learners' interests are supported: Opportunities are available for young learners to explore individual and group interests within the parameters of Australian Curriculum expectations.

Collaboration supports learning: Interactions with play partners provides opportunities for young learners to collaborate and learn from one another.

Learning environments facilitate learning: The learning environment is organised to encourage sustained play interactions, promote curiosity and invite questions. It is flexible and promotes agency.

Time: Young learners require extended blocks of time to engage in deep learning.

Reflection: Young learners benefit from opportunities to discuss their experiences, to share ideas, resolve problems and to listen to the perspectives of others.

Play Types	
Dramatic	- May include multiple participants - Often involves use of symbols and props for example, dramatising a familiar story, role playing community and family members
Fantasy	- May be a dramatisation of events from a favourite program, play character (superhero, action figure) or story - Often includes more than one young learner
Exploratory	Young learners experiment with the properties of equipment and objects for example, the use of digital tools, prisms and magnifying glasses, and materials such as clay and watercolours
Manipulative	Young learners manipulate parts within materials for example, construction sets, puzzles, blocks, beads
Small world play	Utilises miniature equipment including small figurines, animals, furniture and trays
Games with rules	- May include commercial board games with a specific concept as the focus for example, shape, colour, letter, sound, counting - May be board games constructed by young learners with negotiated rules

Physical	• Young learners experiments with ways to move their bodies through drama, music and movement, ball skills and outdoor play equipment
Digital play	• May include multiple participants • Includes tablets, computers, video equipment, digital phones, electronic whiteboards, electronic toys, recording devices, digital microscopes, assistive devices • Young learners experiment with the properties of digital equipment to produce a range of artefacts for personal interest

In categorising common types of play and their corresponding characteristics, it is important to note that these categories are based on adult held perceptions of play. Young learners' perceptions of what constitutes play have been shown to be influenced by a range of factors. Research indicates that young learners categorise play as an experience that is fun (Dunphy & Farrell, 2011; Fisher, 2010), an opportunity to be with friends and enjoy social interactions, and one where choice can be exercised (Dunphy & Farrell, 2011, Einarsdottir, 2011; Pearce and Bailey, 2011). Breathnach's (2017) research into children's perspectives of play in the first year of schooling found that the play experiences children most valued 'were opportunities to make decisions about what they did and with whom' (p. 166). The implications of these findings for the early years of schooling highlight the need to balance teacher decisions with young learners' opportunities to make choices within an agreed play context (focus).

What knowledge, skills and dispositions do young learners need to engage in a play-based approach?

The developmental sequence of play changes over time as young learners develop more complex play skills. This can be observed in the increase in social and intellectual complexity of the play. It is therefore important for young learners to have opportunities to play with a range of play partners and materials. The knowledge, skills and dispositions young learners require to engage in co-operative play with others are closely linked to the Australian Curriculum, general capabilities, personal and social capability.

Personal and social capability: Teachers discuss and model ways to:

Recognise emotions	'When you make plans as a team remember to let everyone share their ideas otherwise feelings get hurt.'
Expresses emotions appropriately	'When something doesn't work out I take a deep breath and think to myself, "What's another way I could solve this problem"?'
Work collaboratively	'I noticed Connor and Hamish discussing their ideas for the car ramp then testing out what angle worked best together. That's what team work looks like.'
Communicate effectively	'If you see that a friend has a problem with a puzzle, ask them if they would like some help and wait for them to answer.'
Negotiate and resolve conflict	'Instead of arguing about whose turn it is to use the microscope, what could we do to make sure that everyone who wants a turn can have one?'
Develop leadership skills	'If you disagree with the ideas your team has for a game, instead of feeling cross you could ask, "How would you feel if we try another way?"'

Critical and creative thinking: Teachers discuss and model ways to:

Pose questions	'If you want to know what you need to do to make your robot move in a new direction, ask our 'experts' a question. "I want it to move" isn't a question because it doesn't have a how, a what, or a why word at the start.'
Identify and clarify information and ideas	'Evie if you explain how you stopped your puppet from flopping over, that would be a big help to Jo and Lani.'
Organise and process information	'Think about when you were on the slide at lunchtime. Now have a close look at the car ramp Jake made in the block corner. What do you notice?'
Imagine possibilities and connect ideas	'I wonder how we could use these big boxes in our vet clinic?'
Consider alternatives	'I wonder if you change the angle of your car ramp whether that will change the speed and distance that the cars travel.'
Seek solutions and put ideas into action	'Making a sign saying "Please don't touch" was a great idea Aiden. Now everyone knows to leave your block construction up.'
Think about thinking (metacognition)	'When I am making a new puppet I draw a picture first, then I think about how it's going to move and what I might need to make it.'
Reflect on processes	'I noticed when Lucy finished her pattern that she checked it to make sure it had a repeating element.'
Transfer knowledge into new contexts	'When Kayla was the customer in the shop she waited her turn in the queue. When it was her turn she said, "I would like 3 apples please." She was showing very good manners by waiting patiently and speaking politely. I noticed she does exactly the same thing in the queue for the tuckshop.'
Apply logic and reasoning	'When Caleb was playing the board game with Samira and Joseph they decided who was going to go first before they started playing. That was sensible thinking because there were no arguments while they were playing.'
Draw conclusions and design a course of action	'If we line the dam in the sandpit with plastic the water won't disappear.'
Evaluate procedures and outcomes	'I think we need to put some rocks around the edge of the plastic to stop it slipping down into the hole.'

Implementing play-based learning

Implementing play-based learning in early years classrooms affords opportunities for teachers to support learning across all learning areas of the Australian Curriculum in combination with the emerging interests of young learners. When using this approach teachers consider a range and balance of strategies that will support play, the degree of support required within the play, and the roles that they adopt as play participants. Adult participation in play using modelling, open-ended questioning, reinforcement, encouragement, interaction, provocation and extended conversations supports young learners in the development of metacognitive skills (Breathnach, 2017, p. 38). Participation and support, however, requires nuanced understanding of the adult role in the play so that the play is not dominated or constantly 'stage managed' by the teacher yet maintains a focus on Australian Curriculum learning area content.

The following examples reflect a variety of roles that teachers adopt when supporting young learners during play. They highlight the importance of adult language choices that sustain play.

- **Listening:** Carefully responding to young learners' conversations, enquiries, questions and theories about the world. Sometimes this may involve paraphrasing what a young learner has said to show that you've been listening carefully, and posing a question to elaborate on the topic, 'So what equipment will you need for the pet shop so that all the animals will stay healthy?' (Links to Biological Science strand living things ACSSU002)

- **Solving Problems:** Allowing young learners to generate their own ideas. For example, a young learner is making a funnel for a box construction boat, using ordinary glue to try and make it stick. The teacher supports the play by stating, 'I can see you having problems making that stick on/ stay upright. That looks a bit tricky, it's leaning. How can we sort this out? What could we use to make it stay on? Can you think of something we might use?' (Links to general capability critical and creative thinking)

- Modelling: Making learning explicit and relevant. The teacher is working with a small group on the concept of counting forwards and counting backwards using a large number line. As the teacher points to each number he counts out aloud from one to ten. The teacher explains that as she counts forwards the number gets bigger and when counting backwards the number is smaller. The concept of counting backwards is reinforced through the movement game of rocket blast off with young learners practising a countdown. (Links to Mathematics number and place value ACMNA001)

- **Questioning:** Young learners have made a puppet theatre with boxes and the teacher comments, 'I would like to see the show but I need to buy a ticket. Can someone tell me where to buy one?' A series of prompting questions give the teacher information about what young learners know about dramatic productions, provide an opportunity to reflect on what they know and to consider ways to extend the play for example, making tickets and signs, organising shows, puppet production and seating. (Links to *The Arts: Drama, understand how the arts work, ACADRM027*).

- **Provoking:** Challenging young learners' ways of knowing, thinking and doing to develop deep understandings. For example, a teacher shares a text in which the doctor is depicted as a male figure. The teacher discusses the idea that doctors may be female and male challenging the inherent stereotyping. (Links to general capability intercultural understanding: challenge stereotypes and prejudices)

- **Researching:** Making interactions meaningful in order to extend children's understandings, abilities and interests. For example, a group of young learners see a grasshopper chewing a plant outside and the teacher uses this opportunity to encourage research inviting young learners to draw what they see and engage in an online search. (Links to Biological Science strand living things ACSSU002)

- **Gradual release of support:** Reducing support as a young learner becomes more confident in applying a new skill, for example, reading a simple text. (Links to English literacy strand, interpreting, analysing, evaluating ACELY 1649)

Play-based learning and cultural considerations

When planning ways to introduce and support play-based learning in the classroom, it is important to have a clear understanding of the significant role that play has in supporting learning. Families often share diverse views about the value of play that may reflect personal beliefs, cultural experiences and expectations, or represent dominant social media opinions and perspectives. The capacity to articulate why play-based learning matters, and the benefits it affords young learners, is therefore, likely to influence the degree of parental support for its use in the classroom. Being aware of individual learner's play preferences and cultural heritage is also helpful as learners' expectations of play will reflect their cultural, community and family experiences. Inviting young learners to share their ideas about play, what they like to play with and with whom is a useful starting point when planning ways to support play-based learning in the context of Australian Curriculum learning and assessment priorities.

Teacher self-reflection on understandings of a play-based approach to learning

- How do I construct opportunities for play within (not as opposed to, or as well as) the learning program/environment?

- Am I clear about what connects the play to the Australian Curriculum, and can I clearly articulate this relationship?

- In what ways do I model, support, initiate and generate play to include the use of, for example, miniature worlds, socio-dramatic, puppet, media, block, sand, water?

- What opportunities do young learners have to initiate play?

- How do I ensure that I do not privilege one form of play over another?

- How do I ensure my own active engagement in the play — before, during and after?

- In what ways does my planning demonstrate a strong understanding of the Australian Curriculum learning area/s and associated achievement standard/s that underpin this approach?