

Play-Based Learning

Practice Notes provide a brief overview of important topics directly related to the practice of early childhood education and offer supporting information to enhance Registered Early Childhood Educators' (RECEs) understanding of them.

Play-Based Learning and RECEs' Obligations

Facilitating play-based learning requires significant knowledge and skills. RECEs understand the theory and research behind how children learn through play. They apply developmental and pedagogical theories that focus on how children learn best through active play experiences that are stimulating, enjoyable and challenging.

RECEs' obligation to understand and implement play-based learning is outlined in the [Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice](#) in Standard II: Curriculum and Pedagogy.

Play-based learning is so fundamental to the practice of early childhood education that it was incorporated into the profession's scope of practice described in the [Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007](#).

Many RECEs also work in environments that are required to follow play-based learning curriculum guidelines or pedagogical approaches set out by the Ministry of Education. For example, RECEs working in licensed child care or EarlyON Child and Family Centres are required to follow

[How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years](#) and RECEs working in kindergarten are required to follow [The Kindergarten Program 2016](#).

Registered early childhood educators co-construct knowledge with children, families and colleagues. They draw from their professional knowledge of child development, learning theories and pedagogical and curriculum approaches to plan, implement, document and assess child-centered, inquiry and play-based learning experiences for children.

Standard II: A., *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*

 For other useful resources go to [#StandardsMatter](#).

Describing Play-Based Learning

Play-based learning, according to education researchers Danniels and Pyle¹, is distinct from the broader concept of play. They describe two types of play that supports children’s learning.

1. Free Play

Play that is child-directed, voluntary, internally motivated and pleasurable.

2. Guided Play

Play activities with some level of adult involvement to embed or extend additional learning opportunities within play itself.

RECEs implement play-based learning across a spectrum and use their professional knowledge and judgement to determine the best approach for specific children or groups of children, areas of development and activities.

Spectrum of Play-Based Learning



Free Play

Guided Play



Early learning curriculum documents in Ontario describe a combined approach to play-based learning that includes free and guided play. *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario’s Pedagogy for the Early Years* encourages educators to co-play and co-learn with children while clearly stating that, “the focus is *not* on teaching a body of knowledge or a predetermined set of topics. Nor is it centred on children’s achievement of a specific skill set [...] programs are most effective when the content of learning is focused on supporting the development of strategies, dispositions, and skills for lifelong learning through play and inquiry” (p. 15).

The *Kindergarten Curriculum 2016* directs educators to use the environment to inspire active engagement through child-directed play and then describes that, “educators engage with the children in inquiries that enable the children to explore their questions [...] The educators offer provocations that build on the children’s thinking or invite the children to engage in new ways of learning” (p. 22).

Play-Based Learning in Practice

During the past several decades, early childhood professionals have combined theories of play, early learning and child development to advance, articulate and implement play-based learning within a variety of curriculum approaches and early learning settings.

RECEs facilitate play-based learning in a variety of ways as outlined below:

- Establish caring and responsive relationships so children feel safe to engage, explore, express themselves and take risks in the learning environment.
- Engage with children in their play to extend their thinking and learning opportunities.
- Create inclusive indoor and outdoor environments that are designed to inspire and invite children's play and exploration with a variety of intentionally selected materials.
- Design schedules that allow for uninterrupted and extended periods of play.
- Observe children's play to determine their interests and co-plan experiences that invite and extend future learning with materials, opportunities and guided activities.
- Document and interpret children's play to make learning visible to children, families and colleagues.
- Communicate the value and importance of play-based learning within a variety of early learning environments.

Facilitating Play-Based Learning



Communicating the Value of Play-Based Learning

From time to time, RECEs need to explain their pedagogical and curriculum approaches to families, colleagues or other professionals along with the value of play-based learning. Below is a framework to help explain play-based learning through practice, research and policy.

Practice

Play-based learning is the primary pedagogical approach studied and applied in early childhood education nationally and internationally.

Provincial curriculum documents outline requirements for educators to implement play-based learning.

RECEs have professional and ethical obligations to implement play-based learning as outlined in the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*.

Research

Play-based learning provides a holistic approach that respects children's natural curiosity and interests and builds competence and self-confidence².

Learning through play has been widely researched and the benefits for children's social, emotional and cognitive development have been identified by numerous researchers and the scientific community broadly³.

Policy

Canada has signed the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) that includes children's right to "engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child".

National educational organizations such as the Council of Ministers of Education and the Canadian Association for Young Children⁴ have affirmed play-based learning as the best approach for early learning and care.

¹ Danniels E & Pyle A. Defining Play-based Learning. In: Tremblay RE, Boivin M, Peters RDeV, eds. Pyle A, topic ed. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Published February 2018.

² Hewes, J. (2006, November 8). Let the children play: Nature's answer to early learning. *Lessons in Learning*. Canadian Council on Learning.

³ Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (2014). CMEC Early Learning and Development Framework. Author [online].

⁴ Canadian Association for Young Children (2016). Young Children Have the Right to Learn Through Play. Author [online].

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