

To accelerate learning, press Play

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Background

One of the primary targets of Sustainable Development Goal 4 is to ensure that "all girls and boys have access to early childhood care, development and education so that they are ready for a primary education."²

Early childhood offers us an exciting window of opportunity for a lifetime of health and educational outcomes. Evidence from neuroscience shows that 85% of brain growth happens before the age of 6. According to the Harvard Centre for the Developing Child, the brain makes over 1 million new neural connections per second in the early formative years.³

Several studies point to the lifelong consequences of early child development. A study done with 30,000 children by the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) titled "The impact of pre-school education on retention in primary grades", (1992), illustrates the direct correlation between exposure to pre-school education and retention rates, attendance rates, and most significantly, learning outcomes in primary school and beyond.⁴ Studies around the world also make the link between quality early education and its long-term bearing on higher income and home ownership rates and lower rates of unemployment and crime.

In India, the most widespread provider of early childhood care is the Anganwadi network which, under the aegis of the ICDS, provides commendable support in early health and nutrition, education and community building to close to 100 million children, aged 0-6 years, and their families.

A recent report by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, however, points to acute staff shortages facing the Anganwadi network.⁵ The Draft National Education Policy, 2019, while lauding the success of the Anganwadis with respect to mother and child health, early nutrition and awareness around immunisation, also acknowledges the deficits in delivering high-quality early education, due to lack of adequate infrastructure and training⁶ and makes recommendations for more developmentally-appropriate curriculum and pedagogy to meet its vision of 'transforming nation sustainably into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society by providing high-quality education to all.'⁷

In this context, identifying key elements of quality learning experiences and supporting communities to access and utilize them are critical to achieving this collective goal.

About guided play

Research shows that playful learning experiences for young children help foster their development in key cognitive, physical and socio-emotional areas and can prepare the ground for them to become creative, engaged, lifelong learners.⁸

Moreover, a supportive adult guiding a child through play can unlock these transformative early learning experiences and build readiness and motivation for future learning.

The types of play described by Fischer et al. (2011)⁹ - free play, guided play and didactic instruction - can be visualised on a continuum of playful learning.¹⁰ While free play and didactic instruction are both associated with positive learning outcomes, evidence suggests that play with some degree of adult guidance and scaffolding is most effective for achieving positive educational outcomes with pre-schoolers. Under guided play, a supervising adult points a child towards discovery and specific

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²United Nations (2016). Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning. Retrieved from: <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education>.

³<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>

⁴Citation retrieved from: Draft National Education Policy (2019), Pg. 45

⁵<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/staff-shortage-hits-anganwadi-services-wcd-report/story-vqmui2RkZLhgCuqFGxDtNl.html>

⁶(Draft National Education Policy (2019), Chapter 1, Early Childhood Care and Education: The Foundation of Learning, Page 48) Draft National Education Policy (2019). Part 1, Ch. 11. Early Childhood Care and Education: The Foundation of Learning. Pg. 47

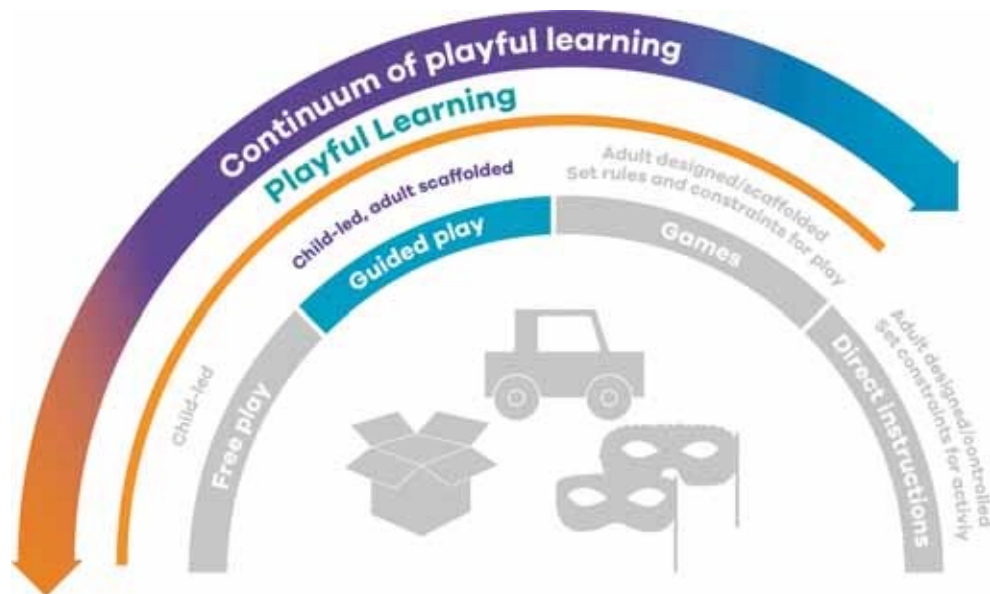
⁷Draft National Education Policy (2019). Vision. Pg. 41

⁸Brooker, Liz and Woodhead, Martin (Ed.) (2013) The right To Play. *Early Childhood in Focus*, 9. The Open University: Milton Keynes, United Kingdom. Retrieved from <http://oro.open.ac.uk/38679/1/ecif9the%20right%20to%20play.pdf>

⁹Fisher, Kelly, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Roberta Golinkoff, Dorothy Singer and Laura W. Berk (2011). 'Playing Around in School: Implications for Learning and Education Policy. In the Oxford Handbook on the Development of Play, edited by Anthony B. Pellegrini, 341-62

¹⁰UNICEF, Learning Through Play (2018)

learning outcomes in a fun, relaxed way. This kind of play involves specific props and toys with which the child interacts to learn more, and close observation and interaction by a supervising adult.



It follows then that a child would benefit if caregiving adults in the child’s universe were empowered with quick, easy, actionable tips and strategies that leverage the principles of guided play to support the child’s development.

What stops caregivers from playing with children?

To understand parental attitudes and behaviours around play, access to material for play and the current role of play in children’s lives, Sesame Workshop India conducted a study in November 2016, with parents of children aged 3 -6 years in 4 zones of Delhi, from a mix of migrant and non-migrant low-resource communities.

The study revealed that most parents see play as separate from education and value formal education over play, perceiving it as a pathway to a better future.

Further, work demands leave parents with little time and energy to engage with their children. As Casey Lew-William points out, “It’s exhausting to be a parent in any circumstance, but it’s much more exhausting to be a parent when you don’t have the resources that other families have.”¹¹

Concerns about safety, especially around daughters of all ages and young sons, further reduce access to play, both outdoors and indoors. Parent themselves lack role models on how to play with their children. Many are held back by negative perceptions around playing. “What will people say when they see me playing with a child?”

Learnings from the Play Every Day initiative¹²

Play Every Day was a multi-country initiative that aimed to get past these barriers and enable children and caregivers to harness the transformative power of play. While contextualised for low-resource communities, the rich, hands-on learning experiences that emerged from the initiative inform global best practices on play and can be universally accessed by caregivers across settings and socio-economic boundaries.

¹¹ Lew-Williams, Casey (2016) Forget Flashcards, Play with Sticks

¹² The Play Every Day initiative was made possible by generous support by the Lego Foundation. It was delivered at scale through partnerships with organisations already working in the target communities in Delhi: Action India (AI), Child Survival India (CSI) and Saarthi Education.

The overarching aspiration for parents of a better future for their children was broken down through play activities into tangible outcomes: play with your children because today's play is tomorrow's happy reality; play helps children learn good values and become responsible citizens; play helps children understand numbers better and develop math skills; play helps children learn skills for reading and building vocabulary.

Over a 12-week programme, caregivers were coached on how to be effective play partners to their children and supported with a public offering of play activities. These activities were developed using feedback from the communities and included contextually relevant content like '*gitte*' (a local game with 5 stones), '*saanp-seedi*' (snakes and ladders) and local songs and ditties. Caregivers were shown how to include play into their existing routines and settings, how to use household or waste objects as material for play, how to guide children in play and how to spot opportunities for discovery and learning through play.

The results in terms of shifts in knowledge, attitudes and behaviour were heartening and pointed to the feasibility of taking a similar methodology to communities at scale to enhance learning outcomes and put high-quality early educational experiences within the reach of every child.

The experience from the Play Every Day initiative generated a series of learnings about ways in which caregivers can be successfully encouraged to incorporate play into their children's lives:

Creating cultural contexts for play

Learnings from the 3-country initiative underscored the importance of a cultural context for play. A standardized framework and same types of play found deep resonance as they were adapted to local cultural norms and children's contextual reality. For example, a 'shop-keeping', counting game gained richness and meaning from being translated into a 'mela'.

Creating environments for play

Community involvement and reinforcement can support parents in their endeavours to incorporate play into daily routines. As the Play Every Day intervention gained momentum, entire communities were sensitised to the link between play and learning through events and rallies, many by children themselves. Community awareness and acceptance of the value of play strengthened the resolve of parents to incorporate play into their interactions with children. Thus, the role of the community cannot be undermined in creating a sustainable culture of playful learning.

Interleaving free-play

Interspersing sessions of guided play with free play can provide caregivers valuable feedback and time to reflect on learning and creativity. As a child assimilates the learnings of guided play and generalises these to free play, attentive caregiver can use these observations to create/build iterative, meaningful and joyful play experiences that take learning forward.

Facilitating play

Effective facilitation is a key contributor to helping a caregiver, whether parent or anganwadi worker, develop as a play-partner to a child. In addition to knowledge about play and child development, methods to introduce play activities to a child, ways to model an activity and strategies to support a child in play and extend learning, softer skills like patience, how to adapt activities, how to form associations between play and learning, how to question and guide a child to discover more are critical to building effective play experiences. A 'train-the-trainer' approach can be used to take effective, playful learning experiences to scale.

As parents become play partners and entire communities are co-opted in the movement, every child can have the opportunity to develop and enhance cognitive and socio-emotional skills to become a lifelong learner while also benefitting from a stronger parent-child bond. In this way, we can help every child grow smarter, stronger and kinder.