



ALL PLAY IS A FORM OF LEARNING

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¿Por qué juegan los niños? ¿Qué tan importante es el juego en el desarrollo de los niños? ¿Cómo se conecta el juego con el desarrollo del lenguaje? El presente apunte permite profundizar en la importancia del juego en el aprendizaje en los niños, y cómo esto aplica al aprendizaje de un idioma extranjero. Este documento presenta información acerca del juego y el desarrollo de los niños, las implicancias que tiene en el aprendizaje y en la adquisición del idioma.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY.

All children love to play, it is one of the most natural and pleasurable things they can do. But why do children play? Have you ever wondered what are children doing when they play? When children play, they are exploring the world around them. They are experimenting and figuring things out. They are concentrating and fully involved in the experience. And the passion that they have for what they are doing keeps the activity going.

When children play, they develop essential physical, social, language and communication skills. But playing also helps children learn about themselves and the world around them. Unfortunately, most parents and authorities, even within schools, believe that if children spend too much time playing, they aren't learning or being challenged. This is a misconception that must be challenged.

It is very important to acknowledge that play IS learning.

It is not either we play or we learn, **play IS learning.**

And for children learning English as an additional language, playing as part of learning is even more important. They need to be encouraged to play. Play with language. Play with ideas. If they see language as toys almost that they can manipulate, that they can play with, that they can change, then they would be much more willing to have a go than if they think it is some set of rules that they do not really know nor understand yet.



Play is fun, all children love playing, and children learn so much through play without even realizing it. So we need to give children time to play, not just ten minutes when they finish their 'work'.

When children play, they are experimenting with ideas, testing hypotheses, mastering skills, using their imaginations and representing their world. If you cut out play when teaching English, you are removing a vital step in childhood development.

Here are a few examples of the different types of things children are learning and developing as they play.

- When playing with **plasticine** children develop their fine motor skills. Children are working on hand-eye coordination and building up the muscles in their hands and fingers when modelling plasticine. These are valuable pre-writing skills, as good muscle strength and hand-eye coordination will help children hold and use writing tools properly later on. By playing with plasticine, children are also experimenting with things like color, shape and texture.
- When playing with **dolls and a tub of water** they are learning about the concepts of wet and dry, floating and sinking, clean and dirty. They are also engaging in sensory play, and experimenting with the way water feels.
- When playing with **musical instruments** children are developing sound recognition (the sounds that different instruments make and an understanding of how sounds can change (e.g. high, low, soft, loud, fast slow) and an appreciation of music. These valuable listening skills are transferable to the area of language and communication.
- When playing with **transport toys**, children are experimenting with friction and motion, up and down, forwards and backwards, fast and slow.
- When children are playing with **blocks**, they are learning about color, shape and patterns, as well as the concepts of weight, size, height, length, vertical and horizontal.
- In **dramatic play** and **small world play** (acting out scenes from real life, stories and/or imagination created with small figures and objects) children are representing ideas that help them make sense of the world around them. They can also experiment with playing different roles and inventing different scenarios, taking them beyond the real world and developing their imagination.



There are different terms to refer to different types of play. However, for this paper we are only making the different between three: Adult-led, adult-initiated, and child-led.

- An **adult-led activity** has been planned, and is controlled by an adult, who stays with the child while the activity takes place.
- In an **adult-initiated activity**, the adult sets up the resources or the activity and guides the experience, but does not controls it.
- Finally, a **child-led activity** is freely chosen by the child, who is in full control of the activity. This type of play is often referred to as open-ended o free play.

Playing alone or with others builds confidence and helps children understand where they fit in.



PLAY AND LEARNING

'What did you do at school today?' 'We just played.'

The idea still persists that if it is too much fun, children are not learning.

However, the evidence suggests the opposite. Research shows that children actually learn through play.

Play is learning.



Internationally renowned expert on early childhood and play, Tina Bruce, outlines in her book, *Early Childhood Education*, the **12 features of free-flow play**:

1. Children use the **first-hand experiences** they have had in life during play.
2. Children **keep control** as they play. Play does not bow to pressure to conform to external rules, outcomes, targets or adult-led projects.
3. Play is a **process**. It has no products.
4. Children choose to play. It is **intrinsically motivated** and **spontaneous**.
5. Children **rehearse their possible futures** in their play. Play helps children learn to function in advance of what they can do in the present.
6. Play has the potential to take children into a **world of pretend**, beyond the here and now, in the past, present and future, and it transforms them into different characters.
7. Play can be solitary, and this sort of play can be **very deep**.
8. Children can **play together** or with an adult, in companionship (parallel play), associatively or cooperatively in pairs or groups.
9. Play can be **initiated by a child or an adult**, but adults need to respect the child's play agenda by not insisting that the adult agenda dominates the play.
10. Child-led play is characterized by **deep concentration**.
11. In play, children try out their recent learning, mastery, competence and skills, and **consolidate** them.
12. Play makes children into **whole people**, able to keep balancing their lives in a fast-changing world.

- Tina Bruce (2015) *Early Childhood Education 5th Edition*

PLAY AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

A child playing with his toy cars can learn and practice words like big, small, or the blue or yellow. If children are given time to play, they have the chance to do some role playing together with each other and using odd English words mixed in with their first language. Or playing teachers and students, and one of them will actually read the storybook that they have been studying in class to the other one and they will join in together. Or playing with plastic animals, and they could say the words. They would build on what they have been saying throughout the year. Children love to play pretend, and they enjoy role playing as their teachers.



But teachers can influence play in children, and use it as a way to introduce or reinforce contents. Think for example on teaching food. You could do a story-telling of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, have the children color the food you mention, or recreate it with plasticine, you can ask them to create their own version of the story with other food, or recycling other vocabulary. They could role play the story. There are so many possibilities!

For older kids, you can use board games, and you can even teach them how to make their own. This is the time for you to use your creativity, and also reinforce theirs.

Extra: Talking to children

Sometimes when an adult hears a child say something in English, they're not sure how to keep the conversation going. As adults, we can extend the conversation by offering the child new options. For example, when a child points to a car and says "car" you can extend on this by saying "yes, a car. Is it mummy's car?" You can also comment on what the child is doing, adding interest and inputting language at the same time. For example, the adult sees the child brushing a doll's hair and says "she's got very long hair, hasn't she? And it's so shiny."

The child is not expected to respond by saying anything, but they are hearing language that is connected to what they are doing, and being encouraged to reflect on things as they play. The most important thing you can do is **to show interest** and even join in with the children as they play. Joining in is also a way of encouraging them to switch to English as they play. If the children are playing shops, you could pretend to be another customer-- "I'd like an apple please." "How much are these bananas?" You could ask them what they want. "Do you want an apple? Or a pear?"

So be genuinely interested in children's play. Ask them questions, comment on what they are doing, do not be afraid to get down to their level and join in.

When talking to children:

- ✓ Try to be at their level, to get down at their level. And make sure you are speaking in a nice, slow, concise way. Make sure that you are not speaking too fast, that you are understanding what level of English they have, and speak to them according to that level.
- ✓ Support what you are saying with gestures, pictures, and pointing, this helps them to feel more secure. Use the same phrases every lesson and then build on them: this also helps them to feel safe and secure.
- ✓ There is no need for providing an explanation for every word you use. Just say "that's the flour, pass the flour. Yes, there's the flour." So, children may not know what you are asking for, but once you pointed to something, they understand.
- ✓ When something is important it is OK to just tell them in their L1 so that they do not get too stressed about it. And remember to grade your language so that you are giving them very basic instructions that they can follow

CONCLUSIONES.

El juego es parte fundamental en el desarrollo cognitivo de los niños, no es solo una actividad recreativa. Estudios han demostrado la importancia del juego en el aprendizaje, pero aún así persiste la creencia de que el juego no tiene lugar en la sala de clases, que si los niños se están divirtiendo no están aprendiendo. Nuestro deber como docentes es ayudar a erradicar esta creencia.

El juego es una herramienta muy útil en la enseñanza de un idioma, que debemos intentar incorporar en nuestras clases tanto como nos sea posible.

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Webgrafía complementaria

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