

The contribution of play to learning, wellbeing and belonging

High levels of wellbeing, including a sense of belonging, are fundamental to children's learning, encouraging the positive development of children's innate exploratory drive and the desire to interact with others.

How do children develop a sound sense of wellbeing in early childhood settings? How do wellbeing and belonging affect learning? Play and relationships are key – although not all types of play and relationships are positive.

THE POTENTIAL OF PLAY

Mature (make-believe) play, unlike 'primitive play', can have a crucial role in children's understanding of themselves and others, and can provide a space where the development of sound wellbeing is nurtured. It generates an ideal forum for a sense of belonging and agency to grow, be tested and strengthened, and where learning can be extended (Bodrova & Leong, 2003).

QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships in which children feel recognised, understood and empathised with – where their feelings and actions have meaning to those important to them – contribute to the growth of wellbeing and sense of agency.

When children are provided with opportunities to express opinions and ideas, and to make suggestions and negotiate (such as in mature play), they increase their capacity for curiosity, the ability to listen to others, and consideration of the rights and achievements of both themselves and others.



MAXIMISING THE POWER OF PLAY

In her presentation at the 2007 European Early Childhood Education Research Association conference, Elena Bodrova stressed the importance of the first six years as a time to utilise the power of play. An approach that focuses on play in early childhood helps children acquire essential cultural tools and develop higher mental functions for essential cognitive and social competence, as well as 'school readiness'.

Bodrova identified three critical underlying competencies that are features of mature play. These three competencies positively contribute to learning and influence the development of the skills necessary to engage in the more formal curriculum of school.

1. Self-regulation – mature play provides children with opportunities to engage in three different forms of regulation:
 - regulation by others
 - regulation of others
 - self-regulation (includes goal-setting and impulse control – adult-regulated children have difficulty setting their own goals).
2. Symbolic representation – through mature play, children learn that something can stand for something else. They practice representation using props, gestures and words to represent real objects, ideas and roles.
3. Perspective taking – this prepares the foundation for metacognition and thought, empathy, group participation and social competence. To stay in play children either have to go with the rules or negotiate a change.

Mature play also impacts on the development of literacy, through:

- oral language – using language to script the play, negotiate, describe imaginary props or act out different roles
- metalinguistic development – naming and renaming objects
- understanding of authentic purposes of reading and writing
- moving children into their 'zones of proximal development' where they use increasingly complicated language (Bodrova, 2007).

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HELPING CHILDREN ENGAGE IN PLAY

Some children will have difficulty engaging in mature play, and scaffolding can help facilitate mature play.

Scaffolding includes:

- helping children use non-realistic props
- children learning physical skills
- building up background knowledge of roles, for example through field trips, guest speakers, books, videos and the internet
- increasing children's repertoires by modelling roles and relationships
- play planning - helping children become more aware of roles and relationships by developing a script and documenting their plans for play, including what they need and what they'll do.

WHY PLAY AND RELATIONSHIPS ARE CRUCIAL

Mature play and quality relationships are the gateway to wellbeing. Wellbeing also relates to optimism, which gives us a sense of agency and hope. When children are optimistic they have the strength and confidence for life ahead, in sharing interactions and being open to the world.

With optimism and agency, children are more likely to feel capable, lead and motivate others, make decisions and succeed in their goals.

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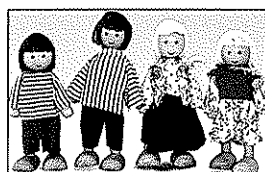
References

Bodrova, E. (2007, 29 August - 1 September). Make-believe play versus academic skills: A Vygotskian approach to today's dilemma of early childhood education. Paper presented at the 17th EECERA conference, *Exploring Vygotsky's ideas: Crossing borders*, Prague.

Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. (2003). The importance of being playful. *Educational Leadership*, 60(7), 50-53.
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Everyday learning about confidence and coping skills provides practical advice and knowledge about what parents and carers can do to help children develop life-coping skills, including building self-esteem, problem-solving, confidence and positivity. To find out more please visit www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/lah0703 or freecall 1800 356 900.



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