



**Learning and developing
through play**

Introduction

Children love to play, and play often mirrors what is important in their lives. When asked about play children talk about having fun, being with friends, choosing activities themselves, and being outdoors. Play can be quiet or noisy, messy or orderly, funny or serious, strenuous or effortless. It can take place inside or outside and develops as children grow and change. Children play for different reasons. Sometimes they are exploring or learning new things. At other times they are consolidating existing learning or practising a skill. Play can also be a way of building or strengthening a relationship. Children often play simply for fun and enjoyment. They bring their own interpretations of situations, events, experiences, and expectations to their play.

Children need time to develop their play. They like having spaces inside and outside, and often enjoy playing with other children and adults. They also need props such as toys, equipment and real objects to play with and manipulate. They love to make choices about when, what, where, how, and with whom to play. These guidelines offer information and suggestions on how the adult can extend and enrich children's learning and development through play.

What is play?

Play is a way of 'doing things'. Table 7 outlines some of its characteristics in alphabetical order.

Table 7: Characteristics of play

Characteristic	Description
Active	Children use their bodies and minds in their play. They interact with the environment, with materials and with other people.
Adventurous and risky	Play helps children to explore the unknown. The pretend element offers a safety net that encourages children to take risks.
Communicative	Children share information and knowledge through their play. Their communication can be verbal or non-verbal, simple or complex.
Enjoyable	Play is fun and exciting, and involves a sense of humour.
Involved	Children become deeply absorbed and focused in their play, concentrating and thinking about what they are doing.
Meaningful	Children play about what they have seen and heard, and what they know. Play helps them to build and extend their knowledge, understanding and skills in a way that makes sense to them.
Sociable and interactive	Children play alongside or with others. Sometimes they also like and need to play alone.
Symbolic	Children imagine and pretend when they are playing. They try out ideas, feelings and roles. They re-enact the past and rehearse the future. This can involve them 'reading' and 'writing' long before they develop these skills.
Therapeutic	Play helps children to express and work through emotions and experiences.
Voluntary	Children choose to play. Their play is spontaneous. They shape it as they go, changing the characters, events, objects, and locations.

Are there different types of play?

There are many different types of play and children can be involved in more than one type at any time. For example, children often pretend they are builders (pretend play) when they are constructing a tower or a road (constructive play). Likewise babies can initiate *peek-a-boo* (games with rules) while investigating a piece of fabric (exploratory play). While children may show preferences for one type of play it is important that they experience a variety of types to support their learning and development across the four themes of *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking*. Table 8 describes different types of play in alphabetical order.

Table 8: Categorising play

Type of play	Description
Creative	Creative play involves children exploring and using their bodies and materials to make and do things and to share their feelings, ideas and thoughts. They enjoy being creative by dancing, painting, playing with junk and recycled materials, working with play-dough and clay, and using their imaginations.
Games with rules	Another type of play involves games with rules . Even babies and toddlers can partake in these, as <i>peek-a-boo</i> and turn-taking games have rules. In the beginning children often play by their own rather flexible rules! In time they also partake in more conventional games with 'external' rules. Language is an important part of games with rules as children explain, question and negotiate the rules. Rules are often an important part of pretend play where children negotiate rules about what can and can't be done.
Language	Language play involves children playing with sounds and words. It includes unrehearsed and spontaneous manipulation of these, often with rhythmic and repetitive elements. Children like playing with language – enjoying patterns, sounds and nonsense words. They also love jokes and funny stories.
Physical¹	<p>Physical play involves children developing, practising and refining bodily movements and control. It includes whole body and limb movements, co-ordination and balance. These activities involve physical movements for their own sake and enjoyment. Children gain control over their gross motor skills first before refining their fine motor skills.</p> <p>Exploratory play involves children using physical skills and their senses to find out what things feel like and what can be done with them. Children explore their own bodies and then they explore the things in their environment.</p> <p>Manipulative play involves practising and refining motor skills. This type of play enhances physical dexterity and hand-eye co-ordination. Over time children need to experience a range of different levels of manipulation if they are to refine their motor skills. This type of play includes manipulating objects and materials.</p> <p>Constructive play involves building something using natural and manufactured materials. As children develop, this type of play can become more complex and intricate.</p>
Pretend²	<p>Pretend, dramatic, make-believe, role, and fantasy play involves children using their imaginations. It includes pretending with objects, actions and situations. As children grow, their imaginations and their play become increasingly complex. Children use their developing language to move from thinking in the concrete to thinking in the abstract. They make up stories and scenarios. Children act out real events and they also take part in fantasy play about things that are not real, such as fairies or super heroes. Children try out roles, occupations and experiences in their pretend play.</p> <p>Early literary and numeracy are clearly evident in this type of play, for example children make lists and menus and pay for cinema tickets. They also get the chance to play with different forms of ICT such as mobile phones, keyboards, cameras, and calculators.</p> <p>Small world play involves children using small-scale representations of real things like animals, people, cars, and train sets as play props.</p> <p>Socio-dramatic play involves children playing with other children and/or adults. It provides opportunities for children to make friends, to negotiate with others, and to develop their communication skills. This play helps extend language. The ability to write stories also has its roots in socio-dramatic play.</p>

See Appendix 1 for examples of resources that can be used to support these different types of play.

¹ Physical play is used to refer to physical, exploratory, manipulative, and constructive play.

² Pretend play is used to refer to pretend, make believe, dramatic, socio-dramatic, role, fantasy, and small world play.

Sometimes individual children like to play alone and sometimes they enjoy playing with others:

- **Solitary play** – The child plays alone.
- **Spectator play** – The child watches others playing without joining in.
- **Parallel play** – The child plays side by side with another child, often with similar materials, but without interacting.
- **Associative/partnership play** – Children begin to play together, developing interactions through doing the same activities or playing with similar equipment or by imitating.
- **Co-operative play** – Children interact, take turns, share and decide how and what to play. They collaborate, develop, and negotiate ideas for their play.

As babies, toddlers and young children learn and develop their play with others becomes increasingly intricate and complex.

Where do children play?

Children love to play inside and outside, and benefit from both. Some children will take part in activities more enthusiastically, and show greater confidence in the outdoor environment than inside. Ideally the outdoor play area should be directly connected to the indoor area providing ease of access throughout the day. Most of the things that can be done inside can also be done outside, for example reading stories, taking part in pretend play, doing group art projects, and playing with sand or water. In the outdoors, activities can also be provided on a larger and more expansive scale. Objects can be transported using wagons, trolleys or wheelbarrows; houses can be constructed using different sized cardboard boxes, old sheets or curtains; marks can be made using large pieces of chalk or buckets of water and large paint-brushes; gardening activities can be undertaken; and roads and dens for mini-beasts can be created.



Responding to the weather

Given the unpredictability of the Irish weather it is important to ensure children have wellies and waterproof jackets plus a change of clothes available in the setting so that they can play outside in all types of weather. It is also useful to have ‘windy day’ and ‘rainy day’ boxes ready to help adults and children respond spontaneously to changing weather conditions as they arise. A windy day box could include items such as streamers, chimes, windmills, a kite, bubbles, weather charts, and relevant picture books. A rainy day box could include umbrellas, sieves, toy boats, toy ducks, containers for measuring rainfall, funnels, charts for recording the level of rainfall, containers for gathering water to recycle (to water flowers and plants indoors, for example), tin foil (for making hats), tapes to measure the size of puddles, and relevant picture books. A covered area or lean-to type structure with a roof and open sides where children can play when it’s raining or where they can play sheltered from the sun is also worth considering. More space means more freedom, and play outdoors provides an ideal environment for a range of exciting play experiences.



Thinking about my practice

1. *How can I take more account of children’s home, social and cultural experiences when observing, thinking about, and planning for play?*
2. *How can I better support the different characteristics of play?*
3. *What types of play opportunities am I providing for the children inside and outside? What themes, aims and learning goals am I supporting through these?*
4. *Is there easy access between the indoor and outdoor areas? How can I give more opportunities to the children to use the outdoor environment?*
5. *Is there a variety of individual, pair and small group play activities available? Can children decide how long, with whom, and what to play?*

What is my role as the adult in play?

The adult provides children with the support, props, time, and space to develop their play. This role involves many dimensions such as when to intervene and when to stand back. The adult takes time to observe, consult, plan, and participate in play. He/she is clear on the great potential for learning that play offers (developing skills and abilities, providing opportunities to co-operate, developing friendships, taking turns, resolving conflicts and solving problems, and developing knowledge and understanding of the world). The adult understands the importance of play for all children. In order to make the most of the opportunities that play provides the adult needs to plan for, support and review play. (See Table 9.)

Table 9: Enriching and extending learning through play

Planning for play	Supporting play	Reviewing play
<p>The adult creates an indoor and outdoor environment that provides a wide range of play possibilities. He/she</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ prepares, plans for and organises activities based on assessment information and the aims and learning goals in <i>Aistear's</i> four themes ■ provides for play experiences that are safe, challenging, inclusive, and enjoyable ■ structures the indoor and outdoor environment so that it reflects children's individual strengths, interests, abilities and needs ■ continually builds on, challenges and extends children's learning and development ■ provides children with choices about what to do and when. 	<p>The adult enhances and extends play based on his/her knowledge of individual children, <i>Aistear's</i> themes, and expertise in play methodology. He/she</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ talks to children about their play, recognises, respects, and supports children's play choices. (Sometimes there can be a tension between what the adult considers suitable and what children want to do, such as playing with guns. The adult discusses and agrees with colleagues how to deal with these tensions.) ■ is supportive without interfering, takes part in play when invited to or when he/she can make a positive contribution, helps children develop the skills for playing, and models play behaviours ■ is aware of and respectful of children's feelings, language, ability, background, and culture during play ■ helps all children to be players, supports interactions and acts as mediator ■ protects children from harm in play and intervenes in situations which could potentially be uncomfortable or harmful for children (physically or emotionally), such as when they are rejected or bullied ■ helps children deal with difficulties such as when they are disengaged or need help getting started. 	<p>The adult gathers information about children's play and uses this to extend their learning and development. He/she</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ observes, talks to and listens to children when they are playing ■ observes how the space and organisation of the indoor and outdoor environment is supporting or hindering play ■ identifies the types and quality of children's play, knows the style and pattern of each child's play and his/her preferences, interests and friendships ■ observes and documents through notes, photographs and video clips what is happening in the play ■ interprets what he/she sees and hears in the play ■ shares information with children and families about the play ■ uses the assessment information gathered in planning for future play.

How do I prepare the play environment?

The environment influences how and what children play. Well-resourced, well-planned and predictable indoor and outdoor spaces help children to see the opportunities that are available for play. There are two roles for the adult in preparing this environment: organising it and resourcing it.

Organising

- **Interest areas** – The adult arranges the space and furniture into child-sized areas rather than in a single large group space. He/she creates well-defined areas of interest that encourage a variety of types of play and helps children see and experience the choices on offer. For example, in out-of-home settings the adult might organise the indoor space into areas such as a messy/art/junk area, a pretend area, a library area, a music and movement area, and a construction area. Outdoors the area could be arranged so that there is a defined area for wheelie toys, a climbing area, a planting area, a wildlife area, feeders to attract birds and butterflies, a space to play with natural materials such as sand, water and mud, and a quiet area with seating. At home a pretend and book area could be set up in the bedroom or a corner of the kitchen, while outdoors a small planting area, a sand tray (an old baby bath that is covered when not in use), and a clear space for wheelie toys could be established.
- **Social and personal space** – The adult creates space for children to play with others and to play alone. Children have their own clearly identifiable personal space in out-of-home settings, such as a cubby-hole or a personal box or container. Children’s personal belongings, items to be taken home, and portfolios can be kept here where they are easily accessible to children and parents. There might also be a quiet corner and a seating area inside and outside where a child can spend some time alone.
- **Outdoor/indoor space** – The adult ensures easy access between the inside and the outside and provides a clear view of the outdoors for all children when they are inside, for example using low level windows.
- **Displays** – The adult puts displays at children’s level. Children’s work shows their name and the date. Displays show positive real-life images that reflect the children in the setting and the wider community.
- **Celebrations** – The adult focuses on festivals relevant to the families in the setting before extending to other festivals. He/she works with parents to decide how these can be celebrated.
- **Storage** – The adult creates storage space inside and outside. Materials are in the same locations so that children can find and return them. Clean up times are held regularly to ensure that spaces don’t become too cluttered. Children have time and space to pursue their own play ideas and can find, use and return materials which are of particular interest to them.

Resourcing

- **Diversity resources** – The environment, equipment, materials, and displays reflect the diversity of Irish society including ability, gender, ethnic diversity, and family structure.
- **Special resources** – Where necessary, materials and equipment inside and outside meet children’s specific needs including physical, sensory and learning disabilities.
- **Literacy and numeracy resources** – Lots of books and displays are provided which show pictures, numbers and words (some in the home languages of the children for whom neither English nor Irish is a first language). There is a variety of mark-making and writing tools and different types of paper available for children to use. A range of mathematical tools are provided, for example calculators, measuring tapes, rulers, height charts, weighing scales, and phones.
- **Open-ended materials** – There is a wide variety of open-ended materials such as big and small blocks, play-dough, fabrics, re-cycled materials, paints, sand, water, clay, paper, and natural items such as stones, twigs and leaves available to promote creativity, exploration and imagination.
- **Sufficient resources** – There is a large variety and sufficient numbers of toys, equipment and materials available to support children when taking part in different types of play inside and outside.



- **Hands-on experiences** – Activities are available for children to touch, taste, smell, hear, and do. For example, children enjoy sweeping the floor, setting the table, hanging out the washing, touching different types of materials, preparing and tasting different types of food, feeling the wind, touching hail stones, digging, watering plants, and feeding animals. A range of real objects are provided, for example real saucepans in the pretend area, real coins to play shop, real shoes for dressing up, and real rolling pins for the play-dough.

As well as organising and resourcing the environment the adult changes his/her role to meet the needs of children of different ages and stages of development as outlined in Table 10.

Table 10: The adult’s changing role in play during early childhood

Babies (birth to 18 months)	Toddlers (12 months to 3 years)	Young children (2½ to 6 years)
<p>The adult</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ provides a secure base from which babies can play and explore inside and outside ■ provides safe, interesting objects and materials for babies to play with ■ introduces babies to other people and places ■ reads and responds to babies’ body language ■ carries out care-giving routines, such as feeding and changing in a playful manner ■ talks to, names and describes things for babies ■ gives support to babies to try new things and also to practise and repeat activities ■ affirms babies’ actions, feelings and behaviours. 	<p>The adult</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ continues to provide a secure base for toddlers to play and explore inside and outside ■ provides opportunities for toddlers to take risks, persevere, move, manipulate, create, pretend, and transport materials ■ changes the environment and the opportunities it offers as toddlers grow (This includes equipment and materials and also changes in levels such as ramps, slopes, steps, and curves.) ■ helps toddlers to experience a variety of types of play ■ provides opportunities for toddlers to play in pairs and small groups ■ is actively involved in playful, adventurous interactions with toddlers, for example active, physical play with them on the floor. 	<p>The adult</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ continues to provide a secure base and to encourage active exploration inside and outside ■ provides opportunities for young children to take part in a range of play activities, especially pretend play ■ provides supports for play, such as a range of materials and equipment and adequate space, time and choice ■ extends and changes the play props regularly, so that different scenarios can be created that reflect children’s changing interests and experiences ■ provides materials to create dens and hidey holes ■ provides direct support such as showing the children ways to join in the play of others, setting up a play scenario, discussing and describing the scenario before, during or after play, supporting children in handling emotions and conflict situations, and helping children make the transition in and out of role ■ plays with children, exercising good judgement so that adult involvement does not threaten child autonomy or harm the ‘flow’ of the play.

Birth.....1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6 years

How do I help children who find it difficult to play?

Children's play develops over time and is enhanced when given the right kinds of supports. While all children have the potential to play some may require extra support from the adult in order to benefit from playing. For example, children who are impulsive or get into many conflicts, children who are withdrawn or isolated, children whose first language is neither English nor Irish, children who have speech delays, and children with sensory or physical impairments often need specialised and focused support from the adult.

Gauging the level of support needed for a group of children is not easy. Through assessment the adult builds a picture of each child's learning and plans activities based on this. The adult focuses on what each child can do and what may be impacting on his/her play, and then modifies the environment to help the child play. Some children need a little longer to make a choice, to solve a problem, or to remember where things are kept. They may not know how to start an activity, or when they start doing something they may need longer to practise. This is fine; one of the benefits of play is its flexibility and it can be adapted to suit each individual child. In helping all children to play, the adult might

- change the physical or social environment, for example alter the play materials so that all children can manipulate them or use a bell to help children with a visual impairment to know that an activity is going to change
- reflect on the quality and quantity of multi-sensory experiences that are available to children and increase or change them
- use co-operative learning to ensure that each child reaches his/her potential, for example have a buddy or mentor system
- simplify an activity by breaking it into smaller parts and limiting the number of directions given at one time
- use the child's preferred activity, material or person to encourage him/her to play, for example the Key Worker might introduce new things
- provide extra support by joining in the child's play or by modelling something several times
- use special or adaptive devices to help children participate
- have photographs of activities for children who can not use oral language, or have simple jigsaws with large sturdy pieces for children who find it hard to grasp things.

The adult provides the level and type of support needed to promote independence and to make play achievable and enjoyable for all children.



Thinking about my practice

1. *How do I organise and resource the spaces inside and outside? How would organising the space into distinct interest areas enhance children's play?*
2. *What activities, areas, toys, and materials do the children and I use most often in play inside and outside? Why?*
3. *What hands-on activities can I involve the children in?*
4. *How can I vary my role and modify the social and physical environment to ensure that all children benefit from play?*
5. *How can I encourage and support all children in their play – boys and girls, younger and older children, children from different backgrounds and cultures, and children with special educational needs?*

How can I use play across Aistear's four themes?

The adult uses different types of play to support children's early learning and development across the themes of *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking*. Pages 60 to 69 present four learning experiences in each theme, one for babies, one for toddlers and two for young children (one in a sessional service or full and part-time daycare, and one in the primary school).

Learning experience 41: Playful routines

Theme: *Well-being, Aim 1 and Learning goal 1*

Age group: Babies

Setting: Home and childminding

Charlie (10 months) has a special relationship with his daddy, Luca. During care routines Daddy interacts and plays with him. Charlie loves it when Daddy says and plays *This little piggy* with his toes when he is changing his nappy. He also loves to play *peek-a-boo* with him when Daddy hides behind the door and pops his head in and out, much to Charlie's delight. Charlie also likes it when Daddy pretends his spoon is an aeroplane when he is feeding him. Charlie especially loves when Daddy flies him up into the air pretending he is the aeroplane. His childminder Linda also interacts with Charlie in a playful way. Luca has told Linda about the games he plays at home with Charlie. Linda plays these games with him too, making the transitions between his home and her home a happy experience for Charlie. Linda gradually introduces new games and other playful routines to Charlie and she in turn shares these with Luca when he collects Charlie in the evenings.



Reflection: Do I know what playful routines children enjoy at home, and how can I use these to make their transitions between settings easier?

Learning experience 42: Helping me join in the fun

Theme: *Well-being, Aim 2 and Learning goal 3*

Age group: Toddlers

Setting: Sessional service (special pre-school), and full and part-time daycare (nursery)

The toddlers in the nursery spend a lot of time outdoors all year round. Some of the children who are quite shy and timid inside become much more active and enthusiastic outside. They run, climb the ladder, go down the slide, kick football, play in the outdoor café, get fuel for their vehicles at the pumps, play with the water and sand, and cycle their tricycles. The staff members play *Hide and seek* with them, organise races, play football, join them for a latte in the café, and chat about what they are doing and learning. On cold days they all dress up warmly in their coats and hats before going outside, and on wet days they splash in the puddles in their wellies and listen to the rain fall on their tinfoil covered umbrellas.

Daniel (almost 3 years) attends a special pre-school three mornings a week. He joins the children in the toddler room in the nursery on the other two days. He can't move any of his limbs so is reliant on the staff to carry him outside. He squeals with delight when they lift him up in the air and when they put him on the slide. The staff talk to Daniel, building up and reinforcing his language, spatial awareness and physical skills, saying, for example, *Now Daniel, you are up, up, up ... now down, down, down*. They place Daniel on the ground and put a ball beside his head. He gets great pleasure from moving the ball slowly with his head and getting it right under the bench. They say, *Well done Daniel ... under, under the bench*. These physical experiences help Daniel's gross motor development and enable him to understand spatial concepts like over/under, up/down, and in/out. The other children regularly run over to Daniel and gently push the ball to him or wave at him. He smiles and giggles when they do this.



Reflection: Do all children in my setting have opportunities to get involved in and enjoy play?

Learning experience 43: The spider's web

Theme: Well-being, Aim 3 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Young children

Setting: Sessional service (playgroup)

The children in the playgroup are outside on a frosty morning. Two boys, Fiachra and James, (both 4 years) discover a large spider's web. They call the playgroup assistant, Zola, over to have a look at it. They are fascinated by the different colours. Zola explains that it is the sun's reflection on the frost that is doing this. Zola is French and she tells them that the French word for spider's web is *toile d'araignée*. They laugh at each other's attempts to say it! She asks the boys if they would like to take a photograph of the web and they race inside to get the camera, each trying to go faster than the other. Zola uploads the photograph to the computer. The boys study it trying to work out how the spider made the web. The boys tell Zola that they want to make a web too. They assemble a range of materials including glue, paper, markers, string, knitting wool, and tinfoil. They spend a long time making their webs and proudly take photographs of them. *Ils sont magnifique, quelles couleurs (They are brilliant, what colours)*, Zola says.

After lunch the boys run out to see the web but have trouble finding it because the ice has melted. They are disappointed. During circle time the group have a discussion about how ice and snow melt and how the ice melting made it difficult for Fiachra and James to find their web. The following day another child brings in a DVD about a spider. They all watch it. Over the following weeks some children do projects on spiders while others investigate ice.



Reflection: How often do I encourage children to get involved in projects on things that interest them?

Learning experience 44: Recreating history

Theme: Well-being, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school)

The junior infants live in a town where there is a large castle. They, along with their teacher and some parents, visited it a few weeks ago. The teacher and children took many digital photographs. The children saw and discussed the various features of the castle and learned about who lived there and the purposes of its different parts. One day shortly after the visit the teacher invites the children to make castles of their own. They are working in groups of four and can use whatever materials they like. Some choose blocks, others Lego, some recycled materials, while others draw pictures.

One group decides to make a model of the castle with recycled materials, including a sturdy cardboard box and small world people. Dylan (almost 5 years) who has spina bifida takes an active part. Lisa, his special needs assistant, has to make some modifications to the materials so that Dylan can take part as independently as possible. She makes sure the castle base has been securely taped to the table and some of the pieces of material already have double-sided tape on them for Dylan to use. As Dylan has some physical disabilities he often needs a little help from his class buddy, Liam, who is always eager to lend a hand. The group is very pleased with the finished article and spend much time playing with it.

Sometimes they take the castle outside at playtime. Dylan holds it on his lap in the wheelchair while one of the others pushes him. One day they forget to bring it back in and the children arrive the following morning to find a wet soggy castle! They see the impact of rain on cardboard but don't seem too upset. They decide to become the sentries and wild animals and they divide the playground into different areas of the castle. Dylan speeds around in his wheelchair fighting off the wild animals.



The castle theme is developed over the following days when the children learn more about the history of the castle and when they read books and watch a relevant TV programme. Their interest in castle life deepens and after many discussions and much research involving interviews with the local librarian the children make period costumes and armour which they model for other classes at assembly.



Reflection: To what extent do I encourage children to think of their individual strengths when they take on roles in their play?

Learning experience 45: Not quite yet please!

Theme: Identity and Belonging, Aim 1 and Learning goal 6

Age group: Babies

Setting: Childminding

Tess (14 months) is a shy little girl who is very sensitive to noise. She becomes upset easily and doesn't like to play with toys that pop up or that make music. She is also very apprehensive about being around other children. Her childminder, Anna, is aware of this and has made a cosy corner for Tess that is away from noise and bustle where she can play happily with books, blocks and soft toys. Gradually Anna introduces Tess to new, more interactive toys. If this upsets Tess Anna puts them away and reassures her. She also supports her in interacting with the other baby she looks after, 15-month old Amy. Sometimes Anna sits with Tess and Amy in the cosy corner. Anna introduces a teapot and cups to the girls and they pretend to have a tea party together. The girls pretend to drink from the cups and Anna gives Teddy some tea too. Tess imitates her and then offers her cup to Amy. Anna pours some more tea for the girls and she talks softly about what is happening. Sometimes Tess shows her enjoyment by smiling and displaying positive body language; at other times she begins to cry and indicates that she wants to play on her own.



Reflection: How can I help children who are shy or quiet to engage and play with others?

Learning experience 46: Fire, fire!

Theme: Identity and Belonging, Aim 2 and Learning goal 5

Age group: Toddlers

Setting: Full and part-time daycare (nursery)

Cáit (nearly 3 years) attends a nursery while her parents work. Cáit's daddy is a fireman and she often talks about him in the nursery. The room leader asks Cait's daddy, Mike, if it would be possible for the nine children in Cait's room to visit the fire station. Mike organises the visit and the children really enjoy the trip. They sit on the engine and get to hold the hosepipe.

The children discuss their visit on returning to the nursery. They talk about the fire engine, what colour it is, how many wheels it has, how it gets the water, and who drives it. During the course of the week they sing songs and read stories about fires and fire engines, and make siren noises and draw pictures of fire engines, fires and fire-fighters. They make models of the fire engine with play-dough. They sort red items to match the fire engine and they play with the small world figures and vehicles to create their own emergencies.

The room leader provides the group with a series of large boxes for them to make their own fire engine that they can sit in. She helps them to cut out windows and doors and to paint it. They love sitting in it, and make siren noises and dress up as fire-fighters. One day during the free play session some of the children decide that the room is on fire and they use the old mobile phone to call the fire brigade. The children are very familiar with what to do having undertaken a fire drill on many occasions. They ask



the room leader to get the register to make sure everyone is accounted for and they all move over to a corner of the room that is well away from the fire. Help comes quickly when two fire-fighters jump out of the fire engine with hard hats and a large hose pipe. The fire is quickly quenched and the room leader is firmly reprimanded for starting the fire!

Over the next few days the staff and children work together to display photographs and paintings and pictures of their trip, alongside their fire engine, for their parents to see.



Reflection: What trip can I organise in the coming weeks to support the children's learning and development?

Learning experience 47: No, it's my turn

Theme: Identity and Belonging, Aim 3 and Learning goal 6

Age group: Young children

Setting: Sessional service (pre-school)

A group of four young children (between 3 and 4 years) are playing outside with the bikes and tractors in the pre-school. A dispute arises. Two children approach Breda, a staff member. She talks to the group of four and asks them to tell her what the problem is. *It's my turn to have a bike*, Robert explains. *And it's my turn to have the tractor*, Jenny exclaims. *No it's not*, David shouts, *I got it first*. Claire sits solidly on her tractor without entering into the argument while Jenny tries to push her off. Breda realises from the children's comments that there aren't enough bikes and tractors for everyone. *So there aren't enough for all of you to have one each. I wonder what we can do about this*, Breda responds: *I'm trying to remember how we sorted the problem about taking turns at the computer last week. Can anyone think how?* The children start arguing again. Then Robert shouts: *I know, the egg-timer. That's how. I'll get it*. He returns a minute later with the large egg-timer to time the turns. After some discussion the four children agree to use the timer, and Robert takes charge of putting it on the step nearby so they can all see it.

Robert and Jenny set up a car wash while they are waiting. When the time is up they run over to tell the others that it is now their turn. Claire grudgingly gives the tractor to Jenny while David refuses to get off the bike. Jenny points to the egg-timer and tells David that his turn is over. He looks at Robert and hands the bike over. Breda keeps a watchful eye as the children manage to share the playthings as they agreed.



Reflection: Do I help children to solve problems and to resolve conflicts among themselves?

Eispéireas foghlama 48a: Margadh an fheirmeora

Téama: Féiniúlacht agus Muintearas, Aidhm 4 agus Sprioc foghlama 3

Aoisghrúpa: Leanaí

Suíomh: Rang naíonáin (bunscoil sa Ghaeltacht)

Le linn sraith ceachtanna drámaíochta bhunaigh grúpa leanaí i rang na naíonán sóisear agus sinsear, in éineacht le Múinteoir Síle, stallaí margaidh sa spás súgartha. Thugadh roinnt mhaith de na leanaí cuairt ar an margadh áitiúil feirmeora maidineacha Sathairn lena dtuismitheoirí agus bhí fhios ag na leanaí eile ina thaobh seo ó na hamanna roinnte nuachta. Fuair Múinteoir Síle frapaí súgartha, mar shampla ábhair scríbhneoireachta agus airgead, soithigh bhia fholmha, agus prócaí. Ghlan sí an bord taispeántais agus d'úsáid é mar chuntar. Ghlac na leanaí ról éagsúla agus thug cuireadh do Mhúinteoir Síle bheith ina custaiméir. Thar an gcéad chúpla lá eile thug siad boinn airgid 1, 2, 5, agus 10 cent isteach ar scoil chun

táirge a cheannach. D'fhorbair an súgradh le linn na seachtaine de réir mar a bhunaigh leanaí stalláí níos speisialaithe. Ag an bpointe sin bhí an spás sa seomra ranga le haghaidh na stalláí an-teoranta. Mhol Múinteoir Síle go bhféadaidís athshocrú a dhéanamh ar na boird agus na cathaoireacha chun spás a dhéanamh. Agus iad ar cipíní, chuidigh na leanaí léi é seo a dhéanamh. Bhí cead pleanála i bhfeidhm anois chun síneadh a chur leis an margadh! Thosaigh níos mó agus níos mó stalláí nua ag teacht ar an bhfód de réir mar a rinne leanaí nithe as taos súgartha agus de réir mar a thug siad cartáin fholmha ón mbaile. Bhunaigh siad stalláí áit a raibh a bpéintéireachta agus a mbláthanna féin á ndíol acu. Thug siad seanbhréagáin agus leabhair ón mbaile leo agus dhíol iad lena chéile. Bhídís ina gcustaiméirí agus ansin ina n-úinéirí stalláí. Chuidigh Múinteoir Síle leo comharthaí a dhéanamh le haghaidh na stalláí éagsúla. Rinne roinnt leanaí comharthaí a thaispeáin praghas a n-earraí.

Sheol Múinteoir Síle nóta abhaile ag insint do na tuismitheoirí céard a bhí ar siúl ag na leanaí agus thug cuireadh dóibh cuairt a thabhairt ar mhargadh na leanaí nuair a bhí siad ag fágáil na leanaí ar scoil nó á mbailiú. Rinne sí fistéip de roinnt de na heipeasóid súgartha. Lá eile bhain sí úsáid as an margadh chun fadhb a chur faoi bhráid na leanaí, agus d'fhiafraigh sí di féin os ard ar chóir di na boinn airgid a bhí aici a úsáid chun íoc as planda a chosain 5c (naíonáin shóisearach) nó 10c (naíonáin shinsearach). De réir mar a rinne gach leanbh na fíorbhoinn airgid a láimhseáil (1c, 2c, 5c, agus 10c), spreag sí na leanaí le hiniúchadh a dhéanamh ar na meascáin éagsúla de bhoinn airgid a d'fhéadfaidís a úsáid le haghaidh na bplandaí.



Ábhar Machnaimh: *Conas is féidir liom úsáid níos mó a bhaint as an súgradh samhlaíoch chun cur le forbairt scileanna litearthachta agus uimhearthachta na leanaí?*

Learning experience 48b: The farmer's market

Theme: Identity and Belonging, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school in the Gaeltacht)

During a series of drama lessons a group of children in junior and senior infants and their teacher, Múinteoir Síle, set up a market stall in the pretend play area. Many of the children visit the local farmer's market on Saturday mornings with their parents and mention it during news-time. Múinteoir Síle gets play props, including writing materials and money, empty food containers, and jars. She clears the display table and uses this as a counter. The children take on different roles and ask Múinteoir Síle to be a customer. Over the next few days they bring 1, 2, 5, and 10 cent coins to school for buying the produce. The play develops during the week as groups of children set up more specialised stalls. Space in the classroom for stalls begins to pose a problem. Múinteoir Síle suggests that they could rearrange the tables and chairs to make room. Excitedly, the children help her do this. Planning permission to extend the market is now in place! More and more stalls begin to appear as children make produce from play-dough and bring empty food cartons from home. They set up a stall selling their own paintings and the flowers they are growing. They bring old toys and books from home and sell them to each other. They take turns playing customers and stall owners. Múinteoir Síle helps them to make signs for the different stalls. Some children make signs that show the price of their merchandise.

Múinteoir Síle sends a note home telling parents what the children are doing and invites them to visit the children's market when they drop off or collect the children. She videos some of the play episodes. On another day she uses the market to pose a problem for the children; she wonders aloud how she can use the coins she has to pay for a 5c plant (junior infants) or a 10c plant (senior infants). With each child handling, observing and exploring real coins (1c, 2c, 5c, and 10c), she encourages the children to explore the combinations they could use to pay for the plants.



Reflection: *How can I use pretend play to a greater extent to develop children's literacy and numeracy skills?*

Learning experience 49: Valuing our languages**Theme: Communicating, Aim 2 and Learning goal 6****Age group: Babies****Setting: Full and part-time daycare (crèche)**

Pema's mother Marta is keen that Pema (17 months) grows up able to speak both Polish and English. Pema's grandpa, Thomas, from Poland has come to stay with Marta and Pema for a month. As always, he brings some new books and toys for Pema. This time he brings a doll with long black hair. They name her Paula. Every afternoon Thomas, Pema and Paula sit together in the kitchen reading the new books. Thomas proudly points to the pictures and names them in Polish. Pema copies him and looks at him with delight as he smiles to affirm her efforts.

Pema attends the local crèche from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. three days a week while Marta works. This morning Thomas, Marta and Pema are walking together to the crèche. Pema and Paula are in the buggy. They have time to stop and point to interesting things along the way: a dog, an ambulance going by with its siren flashing, flower sellers, and the church. Thomas takes time to name the objects and describe them in Polish as Pema points and attempts some of his words. Thomas repeats the words, nods, and smiles to encourage Pema.

When they arrive at the crèche, Aveen, the practitioner greets the family with 'hello' in Polish. Marta proudly shows her father the family wall where there are photographs of all the families in the crèche and a welcome sign in the mother tongue of every child. Marta and Thomas give Pema a kiss and a hug and Aveen takes her to the window so she can wave bye-bye before they play with Paula.



Reflection: Can I do more to bring the children's home languages into the setting?

Learning experience 50: I love to dance and sing**Theme: Communicating, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3****Age group: Toddlers****Setting: Full and part-time daycare (nursery)**

Emily (2½ years) is a shy, quiet little girl. She attends the local nursery everyday while her ma, a lone parent, works. When she dances in the nursery Emily's whole expression changes and her sense of happiness and delight are clearly communicated. She particularly enjoys the songs, *I'm a dingle dangle scarecrow* and *Five fat sausages*. She also loves singing and doing the actions for *I'm a little teapot* and *Ring-a-ring a rosy*, particularly when they are sung in Latvian. She and her two special friends, Victoros and Seán, fall about the place laughing at the end. Victoros loves to hear his home language being used in the setting and starts to talk excitedly in Latvian when he hears it in the nursery rhymes.

Emily also enjoys it when the room leader suggests they take out the musical instruments. She loves marching around the room with her friends making lots of music and noise. She loves it, especially, when she gets the opportunity to do this outside. Máire, the room-leader often makes video recordings of the children's music making and dancing so that the children can share these experiences with their parents. Expressing herself in a variety of ways is important for Emily. Although her mastery of language is excellent she is quite reserved when interacting with other children, yet she loves to dance and move to music.



Reflection: How can I help children express themselves in a variety of ways?

Learning experience 51: Re-enacting the match**Theme: Communicating, Aim 3 and Learning goal 1****Age group: Young children****Setting: Sessional service (playgroup)**

Brazil and Ireland are due to play a friendly soccer match. There are a number of children from Brazil in the playgroup so there is great excitement. Many of the children are wearing their team jerseys. During the morning they make banners and flags. Some of the children are going to watch the match that evening at home and some of their parents are actually going to the match in Dublin. The children and Liz, the playgroup leader, talk about what this will be like at circle time. Some of the children use Portuguese, the official language in Brazil, which promotes additional discussion and curiosity from other children. Liz listens to their stories about who is going to win and what players are the best. After the discussion the children draw pictures related to the football theme. As they draw, Liz listens to the stories about their drawings and writes a sentence beside each picture based on what the children say. She reads this with the children. Some of them join in and help her read their 'stories'.

Outside in the yard some of the children want to be the soccer players on the Irish and Brazilian teams. They make goalposts with their jackets. Liz encourages the other children to come and support the teams. She suggests they charge matchgoers for tickets. They use stones for money and leaves as tickets and Seán and Rianna run inside to get the banners and flags. Other children take chairs outside and organise the viewing stand. Olivia decides she wants to sell ice creams at the match and uses pieces of paper for ice creams. Again, stones are a great currency for making purchases!

Teams are chosen and the rules of the game are clearly outlined. Liz lends the referee, Ciara, a whistle. She blows it loudly and the match begins. The matchgoers scream when the goals are scored and shout words of encouragement when they are not. They wave their flags and banners enthusiastically. The referee blows the whistle a number of times to signal the end of the match, which finishes in a draw. Both sides shake hands and are affirmed by the crowd. Back inside, Liz organises a pretend microphone and she interviews the teams. She extends the conversation by commenting and asking questions.



Reflection: How can I provide opportunities to extend children's play outside as well as inside?

Learning experience 52: Going to the dentist**Theme: Communicating, Aim 2 and Learning goal 4****Age group: Young children****Setting: Infant class (primary school)**

Ms Murphy, the junior and senior infant class teacher, uses the pretend play corner to support children's learning across *Aistear's* themes, as well as language, maths, SESE and SPHE in the *Primary School Curriculum*. Every fortnight or so the play focus changes. Children use the corner to pretend they are cooking and baking or minding babies, in the café, at the doctor's, at the local social welfare office, at the garage, at the library, in the garda station, fishing on a trawler, or going on holidays. This month due to the number of children expressing an interest in teeth, Ms Murphy and the children have decided to play *going to the dentist*. Several children have started to lose their baby teeth while others have gone on visits to the dentist themselves or with older siblings or parents.

The pretend play corner is used as the children arrive in school and at different times of the day and the week, depending on what activities the children are doing. Ms Murphy organises the pretend play corner so that it includes relevant play materials to support children's learning and development, including literacy and numeracy skills. For example, there is a telephone and computer for the dentist's

receptionist. There is also a notepad and pencil for making appointments and there are books and magazines in the waiting area.

The children are really excited about creating their own dentist's surgery. Over the next week they organise and reorganise the surgery expanding their patient list as they go. They make posters and price lists for the services on offer. Sometimes Ms Murphy plays with the children; at other times she observes the play from a distance. Occasionally she intervenes to extend the play, especially when it seems to become repetitive. She sometimes adds a new prop, introduces a new word or idea, makes a suggestion, helps resolve a conflict, or models a new role. During the course of the week, as well as playing in the pretend area, the children have conversations about their visits to the dentist. They listen to stories about the dentist and read relevant books in the library corner. They play with props such as goggles, mouthwash, dental picks, toothbrushes, toothpaste, white coats, drills, magnifying lenses, mirrors, and injections. They play games such as *I spy*, *Spot the difference*, *Pick the odd one out* using pictures and objects connected to the dentist. Most children are using lots of words associated with the dentist. On Friday the dental nurse from the local health clinic comes in. She uses a giant brush and teeth to explain how to brush your teeth. By the end of the week business is booming in the dental surgery with treatments such as making false teeth and fitting braces being offered.



Reflection: How regularly do I observe and listen to children in pretend play scenarios, and identify ways to extend their play?

Learning experience 53: Getting to know you

Theme: *Exploring and Thinking, Aim 1 and Learning goal 2*

Age group: Babies

Setting: Home

Meagan (5 months) is lying near her cousin Doireann (8 months). The girls are on a mat which has lots of play objects attached to it, such as mirrors, crinkly materials, rattles, animal sounds, fabric flaps, and dangling animals. Meagan shows Doireann that she is enjoying her young cousin's company. She stretches out her hand and touches Doireann's leg. Both children smile and coo with delight. Meagan's mum, Niamh, shows the girls the different features of the mat. She lies beside the two children and presses buttons to hear the animal sounds. She encourages the girls to feel the different materials. She holds their hands to help them use the rattles. When the girls appear to lose interest she sings *Round and round the garden* using actions with each of the girls. The girls let her know they love the tickly feel of her finger doing a circular movement on their hands as she sings with them. Doireann holds her hand out many times signalling for more. After singing, Niamh points to their clothes and body parts and describes these. *Doireann has white socks on, Meagan has blue ones. Doireann is touching Meagan's fingers nice and gently. Do you like that Meagan? I think you do.* And so the exploring and talking continue.



Reflection: What can I do to help children interact with and learn more about each other through play?

Learning experience 54: We love horses so let's be friends**Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 2 and Learning goal 5****Age group: Toddlers****Setting: Sessional service (playgroup)**

Bernadette, a Traveller child (2 years and 10 months), is newly arrived to the playgroup in the middle of the year. Her family keep horses and travel to fairs all around the country. As part of their fortnightly team meeting the staff discuss what they can do to help Bernadette make the transition to the playgroup. They agree to source posters of horses and fairs to display on the walls. They also ask the local training centre to make a small trailer and a model halting site to add to the small world play area. They add more horses to the farm set.

Michael (3 years) who lives on a farm loves everything to do with farming—animals, tractors and books about farming. Michael spends long sessions every day setting up and playing with the farm. He arranges gates to keep the cattle in and makes sure all the animals have water. This play mirrors the real life things he loves to do with his Mam and Dad who both work on the farm. Michael is delighted with the addition of the new horses. Bernadette likes to stand nearby and watch Michael play. She often sits beside him, too, taking part in onlooker play. The staff observe this.

After a few days, with a little prompting from Nora, the playgroup leader, Bernadette decides to join Michael in playing with the horses. They start to form a friendship. Nora supports this by asking them to do things like tidying up in pairs and she encourages them to play together outside. They love to play horsey games. Bernadette really likes this as she often goes to watch her Da in sulky races with their own horse. Sometimes Michael pretends to be the horse and Bernadette pretends to be her Da. Bernadette holds on to his jumper as he runs around. Bernadette tells him to giddy-up and slow down. Occasionally Bernadette uses 'cant' words while she is playing. Nora is interested in finding out more about this from Bernadette's parents. At the next team meeting she suggests to her colleagues that they learn and use some cant words to help Bernadette feel happier and more comfortable in the playgroup. This would also help the other children to learn more about Traveller life.



Reflection: Do the play props in my setting reflect the cultures and backgrounds of all the children?

Learning experience 55: The power of music and story**Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 3 and Learning goal 4****Age group: Young children****Setting: Full and part-time daycare (crèche)**

Abi (almost 4 years) has Down syndrome and attends her local crèche. The staff use music a lot during the day. They sing a special chant to ease transitions from one activity to another and use upbeat songs to raise energy levels, especially during the afternoon. Mella, the room leader, notices that Abi responds very positively to music. Abi helps tidy up energetically when they sing the tidy up song. She loves it when they sing the welcome song, *Hello Abi, how are you today?* (going through the names of all the children). She smiles and takes a bow when her name is sung.

Abi especially loves it when they sing, *When you're happy and you know it*. She becomes very animated and responds enthusiastically. Mella also uses lots of language play to help Abi and other children with their language development. They play rhyming games and Abi laughs when her friends make up jokes and nonsense words. She also loves to listen to tongue twisters.



Mella uses creative storytelling to introduce the children to new words and ideas. She wears a special storytelling hat and cloak to help everyone get into the mood for stories. The children sit on beanbags. Mella sometimes uses music for her storytelling. She tries to match pieces of music to the stories. Abi loves this part.

With help from the children and their families Mella has developed a range of props which she places in a story bag to help bring stories to life. For example, in the bag (a colourful pillowcase) there might be four or five props that connect with the story. These might include small world people, transport and animal figures, pieces of fruit, pictures of characters with their names printed underneath like *The Gruffalo*, *Alfie* or *Spot the dog*, key words printed in large font like *Not I said the pig, not I said the duck* in the story of *The Little Red Hen*, masks displaying different feelings, pieces of cutlery, a baby doll or teddy bear, a hat, shoes, items of clothes, different types of food, a flash lamp, a stethoscope, keys, a mobile phone, coins, photographs, toys such as a puppet fox or a cardboard cut out for the *Gingerbread Man*, vegetables such as a turnip for the story, *The Enormous Turnip*. The list of props is endless! Mella also tries to include a factual book that relates to the story. It might be about the country that the story is set in, a book on gardening, a book on sports or animals. Mella's local librarian is a great help to her in sourcing all her books. Abi is always enthralled listening to the story and wonders what Mella will produce next!



Reflection: What play props can I use to bring stories to life?

Learning experience 56: Story time

Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 4 and Learning goal 5

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school)

The senior infant class of 28 boys are getting ready for story time. They make themselves comfortable on the mats on the floor at the back of the classroom near the library area. The teacher has his storytelling hat on and has a series of props ready to assist him in his telling of *Jack and the Beanstalk*. He reads the story with the help of some of the boys who have been chosen to take on the different roles in the story.

During discussion time Mr O'Donnell asks the boys to describe the different characters in the story. He also asks some questions such as: *Was it right for Jack's mother to send him off on his own to sell the cow? Was it okay for Jack to keep stealing things from the giant?* Some very interesting conversations ensue. Later that day the boys play word games with some key words from the story. They love doing this and especially like making up nonsense words.

The following day Mr O'Donnell revisits the story and asks them to think of alternative endings for it. Later during drama time the boys re-enact the story of *Jack and the Beanstalk*. They incorporate the new endings such as Jack and the giant becoming friends, Jack selling the cow for a lot of money, running away and not giving the money to his mother, the guards catching Jack walking along the road with the cow and taking him to the station, the principal of his school ringing his Mam to see why he isn't at school. The teacher builds on their ideas and helps them to develop their stories. Over the next two days, working in pairs, the boys write their own story of Jack. They use words from the whiteboard based on their various discussions and they use their own spelling for other words. The children add illustrations to their story. When Mr. O'Donnell suggests to them that they could staple the pages together to make little story books, some children decide to add their names as authors and illustrators. They add page numbers and some even add ISBN codes! The following week the boys visit the junior infants classroom to read to the children in small groups. Parents get a chance to read the books when they drop the boys off in the morning or when they are collecting them in the afternoon.



Reflection: How can I use storytelling to promote higher-order thinking skills?



Conclusion

Play can be fun, challenging and enjoyable for both adults and children. By helping children to take part in different types of play on their own and with others, and by providing a well-resourced play environment inside and outside, adults can greatly enrich the learning opportunities that play provides.

