

# Aistear

*Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige*  
*The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*

**Play as a context for early learning  
and development: A research paper**

**Executive Summary**

# **Play as a context for early learning and development: A research paper**

## **Executive Summary**

By Margaret Kernan, PhD

Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA.

# Play as a context for early learning and development

## An executive summary

The image of the child presented in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) consultative document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (2004) is that of a capable and active learner. Supporting this image is the identification of play and relationships as the two primary contexts for learning. By viewing early learning through the 'relationships lens', the Framework emphasises the highly interactive and social nature of learning. The question arises regarding the specific understanding of, and role of play, within such a vision for learning in the early years.

The paper *Play as a context for early learning and development* addresses the relationship between play, development and learning with the ultimate aim of elaborating on the place of play in the *Framework for Early Learning*<sup>1</sup> being developed by the NCCA. In this respect, the paper seeks both to re-examine the 'taken for granted' position of play as central to early childhood curricula, and to conceptualise a rigorous understanding of a 'pedagogy of play' that has relevance for children in the diversity of early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings in Ireland, and across the broad age range of early childhood from birth to six years.

## Understandings of play in early childhood

The key points arising in Section 1 of the paper, *Understandings of play in early childhood: children's and adults' perspectives* can be summarised as follows.

- Play is highly significant to all children in their everyday lives at home and in ECCE settings.
- An understanding of play as a fundamental need and right of all children and central to their well-being offers a powerful construct with which to legitimise and secure the place of play in ECCE.
- The most significant characteristics and dispositions of play in early childhood include: play's voluntary nature; its meaningfulness to the players; its low risk; its spontaneity and openness to the surrounding world; its symbolism; its ability to deeply involve and sustain children's concentration; its activity, sociability, joy, and sense of fun.
- There is considerable variation in understandings of play in ECCE across different contexts. This stems from historical and cultural traditions and values, dominant political concerns and broad discourses concerning childhood, learning, care, education, and power relationships between adults and children in ECCE settings.
- Adults have an important and active role in supporting children's play. The precise nature of their involvement can be viewed as a continuum between indirect planning for play to direct involvement in the play.
- There is a tension in current ECCE in Ireland between the vision/theory of play and children's everyday play experiences.

---

<sup>1</sup> The *Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009.

## Theorising play in early childhood

The key points arising in Section 2 of the paper, *Theorising play in early childhood* can be summarised as follows.

- Research in human development indicates that play encompasses an important role in the all round development and learning of children.
- The following types of play are considered the most salient forms of play with respect to children's holistic development during the early childhood years: exploratory play, constructive play, creative play, pretend, fantasy and socio-dramatic play, physical, locomotor play, and language and word play.
- The form and focus of play is influenced both by children's development and the socio-cultural and ecological context in which play and development take place. These factors interact with each other.
- A diversity and equity approach to play in ECCE is based on the principles of inclusiveness - everyone belongs, everyone has an equal right to play, and the origins and value of all are appreciated and respected. Thus attention is paid to both the commonalities and differences in play.
- It is important that the organisation of time and space is in tune with the pedagogical vision of an ECCE setting. Factors such as being aware of and respecting children's rhythms of play, and being aware of how the design of the physical space and available affordances can effect how play develops, are important considerations in both home and ECCE settings.
- Children need to feel safe and secure when they play. However, it is important that adults balance children's need for safety with the recognition that risk-taking and challenge are developmental necessities and are important for children's well-being.

## A pedagogy of play

The key points arising in Section 3 of the paper, *A pedagogy of play: strengthening the relationship between play and effective learning and development* can be summarised as follows.

- Key aspects of the early years practitioner's role in supporting the play of babies and young toddlers include providing a secure physical and emotional base and being responsive to children's motivation to play and explore.
- A great deal of the play of toddlers relates to their developing physical and locomotion skills for which they exhibit great enthusiasm. Therefore, the play environment should provide challenge and freedom to move on diverse floor-areas, indoors and outdoors.
- Pretend and socio-dramatic play are important parts of the play of young children and are significant in their friendships. In order to support children's pretend play adults need to be skilled observers, listeners and interpreters of the children's play, and are respectful of their feelings, intellect, language, culture, and right to privacy.
- Opportunities for hands-on experiences are important for children's development.
- Design considerations such as the provision of small spaces, den-making materials, pathways and boundaries are key elements in providing for opportunities for solitary, private, small group, and larger group play.
- Play and hands-on experiences continue to be of significance to children at the transition between early and middle childhood.



## Conclusion

In conclusion the paper raises many issues of consideration when thinking about the place of play in ECCE. It uncovers the complexity and multi-faceted dimensions of play and learning in the early childhood years. In making play a central part of the curriculum and an important part of the children's daily experiences, early years practitioners need to be able to articulate the rationale for their decisions in ensuring that all children derive benefit from their play experiences in ECCE settings. Drawing from a broad multi-disciplinary literature, the paper brings together a number of key concepts that serve to illuminate a pedagogy of play in everyday practice. These have relevance for all children in Ireland and are also relevant to all adults who have responsibilities towards children in their homes and in ECCE settings.



## References

- Kernan, M. (2007), *Play as a context for early learning and development*, *Research Paper to Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, [www.ncca.ie/earlylearning](http://www.ncca.ie/earlylearning)
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2004). *Towards a framework for early learning: A consultative document*. Dublin: NCCA.



National Council  
for Curriculum and Assessment  
24 Merrion Square  
Dublin 2, Ireland.

Telephone: +353 1 661 7177  
Fax: +353 1 661 7180  
E-Mail: [info@ncca.ie](mailto:info@ncca.ie)  
Website: [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)