

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO

# EMBEDDING PLAY IN THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM

This free document has been created to support educators in having conversations about embedding play in the primary curriculum.

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# A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO EMBEDDING PLAY IN THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM

## EMBEDDING PLAY, A JOURNEY OF IMAGINATION AND TRANSFORMATION



## MY PERSONAL PLAY STORY

Embedding play into the primary curriculum is not just an opportunity, it is a transformational journey that unlocks the innate curiosity and boundless creativity within every child. My passion for play stems from my own experiences growing up in a play-rich environment, aka the most 'lit' place in the world, an **adventure playground**, spending much of my childhood amongst every type of play imaginable.

This was a magical space where creativity thrived, and the everyday was reimagined into extraordinary adventures. Towering wooden structures became royal castles, rope swings turned into jungle vines, and cardboard boxes were transformed into rocket ships bound for the stars. These experiences weren't just fleeting moments of childhood joy; they were the building blocks of my ability to think critically, tackle problems head-on, and face challenges with unshakable resilience.

Of course, each scraped knee and many broken bones became a badge of honour in my playful pursuit of adventure, proof that every tumble came with a little life lesson (and a pretty cool story to tell). This foundation has fuelled my work as an inclusive play consultant, worker and advocate. From working with schools, helping educators integrate play into their systems and witnessing firsthand the profound academic and emotional impact it has on children.

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## THE POWER OF IMAGINATIVE PLAY

At the heart of play lies the incredible power of imagination. Children have an extraordinary ability to transform their environment into worlds of wonder. A simple classroom chair can become the cockpit of a spaceship, a stick transforms into a wizard's wand, and a pile of leaves turns into buried treasure on the beautiful island of your choice, mine would be Anguilla of course! Imaginary play, where everyday objects are vehicles of creativity, invites children to think beyond limits, explore abstract concepts, and engage deeply with their learning.

One example was a classroom I worked with that was transformed into a fantasy restaurant to teach maths. Students crafted playdough vegetables and served them on plates they moulded themselves. As one child exclaimed, "Miss, this is so cool! I've got six broccoli and two carrots—that means there are eight veggies on my plate! Maybe I should try veg a bit more, innit Miss?" This playful approach not only made abstract addition concrete but also sparked curiosity about healthy eating. Through this style of play, the classroom itself became an interactive space, sparking both academic growth and joyful discovery.



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## THE POWER OF IMAGINATIVE PLAY

Here are some ideas to start you off:

- *Imagine a geography lesson where the classroom becomes a bustling “travel agency,” complete with maps and passports, and children take on the role of travel agents planning imaginary trips around the world.*
- *Transform your history lesson into a “time machine,” where children dress up as historical figures, use props, and role-play their lives.*
- *Get creative with STEM learning by having a “science lab”, add white lab coats (old shirts!), clip boards, safety goggles and relevant resources for whatever your focus is for your science curriculum.*
- *Problem solving activities lend themselves to being part of a “detective agency” - note books, magnifying glasses, and all sorts of problems to solve!*

These transformations turn the classroom into a playground of discovery, fostering engagement and collaboration while directly supporting academic objectives.

### **Reflective questions:**

How might adopting specific learner roles, such as explorers, inventors, or storytellers, deepen children’s engagement and enrich their experiential learning processes?

Alternatively, which curriculum areas could lend themselves to immersive, play opportunities such as using role-play to contextualise historical narratives or conducting simulated scientific investigations to enhance inquiry-based learning?

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## **THE PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF PLAY**

The integration of play into the curriculum isn't just a creative endeavour; it aligns with foundational pedagogical principles that enhance learning outcomes. Play embodies constructivist learning, enabling students to build knowledge through hands on experiences and exploration. It nurtures active engagement, scaffolding, and inquiry-based exploration, encouraging children to ask questions, reflect on their actions, and adapt their strategies. Play also supports holistic development, bridging academic, social, and emotional growth.

## **PLAYFUL DISCOVERY: EMPOWERING CHILDREN TO LEARN THROUGH ACTION AND EXPERIMENTATION**

### **PLAY BUILDS LEARNING FOR LIFE**

Children naturally learn through experimentation, embracing the process of trial and error as they uncover the world around them. Life, in many ways, mirrors this journey, it's about confronting challenges and navigating moments of uncertainty, often with a small dose of danger to keep things interesting! Whether it's an adult taking the leap to change careers or a child testing the limits of a new playground game with friends who might not want to join in, these experiences hold the essence of play because they push boundaries, discovering limits, and growing through every stumble. As you know, while the classroom offers a safer and more controlled environment, the relative risks, whether balancing a stack of blocks or exploring a new idea - still carry a level of uncertainty plus the spirit of adventure that defines learning.

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## PLAY IN SEND SPECIFIC GROUPS

One of the most extraordinary aspects of play lies in its remarkable adaptability. It effortlessly shapes itself to meet the unique needs of each child, creating a bridge between learning, creativity, and personal growth. In SEND specific settings, this flexibility becomes a powerful tool for inclusivity and empowerment. For children navigating communication challenges, dramatic play offers a transformative gateway to self-expression and language development.

By creating an environment that is both engaging and pressure-free, educators can provide children with opportunities to explore language and build confidence.

Here are some ideas:

- act out a favourite story
- role-play as shopkeepers
- use puppets to narrate experiences



Dramatic play fosters meaningful interaction, encourages vocabulary expansion, and creates safe spaces for children to communicate in their own way.

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## CONNECTING PLAY TO THE CURRICULUM

### Reflective Question

*Take a moment to consider what kinds of play are organically happening in your classroom, and how can you intentionally connect them to the curriculum?*

Here's the magic of play based learning and playwork. It's not just about letting kids have fun (though that's a given), it's about unlocking a powerful pedagogical tool that builds bridges between engagement and achievement. When we observe, harness, and scaffold the play happening right in front of us, we create meaningful links that deepen understanding and inspire inquiry led learning.

In my work with educators, I've seen firsthand just how powerful it is to embed play into the curriculum. The results speak for themselves. Teachers consistently report that play based approaches foster significant improvements in critical thinking, academic achievement, and overall learner engagement.

Here's how this can happen:

- *Imagine children recreating playful historical events. Suddenly, that list of dates and names evolves into a living, breathing story they fully immerse themselves in, improving their conceptual understanding and communication skills.*
- *Now take science lessons outdoors. When students get hands on with ecosystems, observing plant life, sketching insects, experimenting with habitats, these abstract theories leap from the textbook into lived experience.*

This is experiential learning at its peak, connecting theoretical knowledge to concrete understanding.



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## IT'S YOUR TURN - READY TO BE PLAYFUL?

Here are three ways you can start to embed play into your classroom ethos:

- Create themed play stations loaded with loose parts like bottle caps, fabric scraps, string, cardboard boxes, and sensory items (think egg cartons turned into treasure chests). Encourage children to explore and construct knowledge actively. These materials are the medium through which learners test hypotheses, solve problems, and make sense of the world around them.
- Anchor these stations to curriculum objectives. For instance, an engineering themed station may allow learners to build structures while exploring concepts of balance and gravity.
- Incorporate Constructivist Play Breaks.

Play breaks aren't just energisers. They're crucial for consolidating knowledge. Why? Because they align with the principles of constructivist learning, allowing children to process information through active experimentation. A quick 10 minute play interval might feature creative play with props, collaborative brilliance, or free form building challenges, all of which facilitate exploration and cognitive connections. These breaks refresh energy while reinforcing subject matter in a multisensory, child-centred way.

Don't forget to connect with the expertise of your Early Years colleagues. Their curriculum will revolve around play, and they may be able to help you with ideas, resources and approaches.

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## THE HOLISTIC POWER OF PLAY

The true brilliance of play based pedagogy lies in its ability to support whole child development. Beyond measurable gains in academic performance, play nurtures emotional intelligence, cultivates resilience, and strengthens collaboration skills. It activates intrinsic motivation and encourages self-directed inquiry, sparking curiosity that evolves into a lifelong passion for learning. As a proud product of an adventure playground upbringing, I've learned to see the world through a lens of creativity and possibility. Play taught me to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary.

My mission is to help educators bring that same spark into their classrooms. When you embrace play as a pedagogical approach, you're not just teaching subjects. You're shaping learners who are thinkers, dreamers, and doers. Together, let's transform classrooms into hubs of innovation, curiosity, and exploration, where every child has the chance to discover their unique potential. Ready to ignite this playful revolution? Let's get building, rocket ships, castles, or whatever their imaginations dream up next.

