Active learning through play
Adult-initiated/guided play
Adult play
Adventurous (see R = Risk/Risky play)
Assessment and play
Authentic play (see Introduction)
Autotelic activity

Active learning through play

Active learning through play is closely related to experiential learning for young children; the basic need to experience things for oneself through action and all one’s senses. The old adage ‘I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand’ could well have been written for young children – and their educators. Most children are innately active: nature seems to be aware that it is the most preferred mode of ‘being’ for babies and young children.

Action is not only about physical movement; it is also mental action – the brain must be actively engaged if remembering and understanding are to take place. Recent US research confirms that not only do children learn by doing and that action is the child’s preferred mode of learning, but also that physical activity stimulates the brain much more than sitting still. Being active feeds oxygen, water and glucose to the brain, heightening its performance. Active learning also creates more neural networks in the brain and throughout the body, making the entire body a tool for learning.

Play has a huge role for the young in ensuring that they are active both physically and mentally. In the ostensibly simple act of bouncing a ball, a child is both physically and mentally co-ordinating actions and might also be learning that different actions can make the ball bounce higher or move in different directions.

The famous US HighScope programme is based on children’s active learning and defines it thus: ‘Active learning is ... learning in which the child, by acting on objects and interacting with people, ideas, and events, constructs
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new understanding. HighScope takes this further by incorporating children’s thoughtful reflections on their own actions as a means of consolidating both physical and mental learning.

Kinaesthetic learning is closely related to active learning: Gardner defines the core elements of kinaesthetic Intelligence as the ability to use one’s body in highly differentiated and skilful ways for creative and expressive purposes and the ability to work adeptly with objects, both those that involve fine and gross motor movements.

Example A1
Thomas, aged 1.2, is sitting with a wooden spoon and a saucepan his Gran has given to him. He waves the spoon around and, accidentally, it lands heavily on the pan. He looks about to cry at the loud noise but moves the spoon near the pan again and, this time, gets a gentler sound. Thomas continues to bang getting different sounds dependent on the strength of his action. He hears, sees and feels the effects of his actions and, we can speculate, learns much about cause and effect!

It is acknowledged that boys particularly are more engaged with learning when they are able to play and be physically active. This is due not only to brain development, but also to male sex hormones (androgens). Other researchers provide evidence that boys, who on average have a slower rate of maturation, show significant physical and other differences from girls that affect their responses to early education. Boys seem to need more opportunities for physical play activities than are generally available in reception classes.
ADULT-INITIATED/GUIDED PLAY

Both active and kinaesthetic learning present a strong argument against young children’s use of electronic toys and computers that, at best, offer very limited sensory experiences. For example, actively exploring the outdoors presents sights, sounds, textures and smells enabling the learning of scientific principles in a way that no two-dimensional media possibly could.⁹

**Adult-initiated/guided play**

Adult-initiated/guided play differs considerably from child-initiated play in that the child may or may not perceive the activity to be ‘play’ at all! There are other terms that could be included here, for example, adult-guided, adult-led, adult-chosen, adult-directed, adult-inspired and adult-managed, all of which differ slightly but essentially mean adult ownership.

Adult-initiated play activities usually have a learning intention in mind and have an end result. The adult may or may not be involved in the play once it has begun but might need to model play for some children. The adult is mainly a facilitator, stimulating, challenging and enriching the children’s experiences and providing the resources and context. If the children take ownership of the task, then it may become play. Adult-guided tasks and experiences allow the adult to extend and assess children’s learning in ways that may be described as ‘playful’ rather than play. The challenge for educators is to achieve an appropriate balance. Many people believe that adult-initiated or adult-guided play should occupy only a small amount of children’s time, if any (e.g. Bruce¹⁰), whereas others believe that children will not progress without some adult direction (e.g. Early Years Foundation Stage), which states ‘The EYFS requires providers to ensure a balance of child-initiated and adult-led play-based activities. Providers should use their judgement and their knowledge of the children in their care in deciding what the balance should be.’¹¹

**Example A2**

In Little Acorns Nursery the day is structured for the 3–5-year-olds to allow for two periods of adult-initiated play. The observed morning session shows the practitioner initiating the children in how to create sounds from a range of musical instruments. Following 10 minutes of adult-initiated and guided activity, the practitioner leaves the group of four children to play with the musical instruments. At first, they simply make loud noises but, gradually, the children form themselves into a ‘band’ and snake their way through the nursery corridors pretending to be at a parade (they’ve seen one the previous week in their local village).
ADULT PLAY

Adult-initiated play is relatively easy to set up – the best practice arises when the children are able to take ownership of the task, thus enabling it to become true child-led play as in the example.\(^\text{12}\)

The BERA Report concluded:

Pedagogy based on play is difficult to achieve in a context of prescribed outcomes but young children learn most effectively in settings where the curriculum is planned and they are taught informally, learning through a balanced combination of child-directed and adult-initiated activity.\(^\text{13}\)

**Adult play**

Adult play occurs far more often than we might imagine. As I have written elsewhere,\(^\text{14}\) there is the obvious play of adults involving leisure activities such as games and sports, but there is also, for example, the matter of playing with ideas, playing different roles for different audiences and seeing the funny or ironic side of things (humour). The importance to adults of play and playfulness can be directly reflected in how they react to, and interact in, children’s play: the most enthusiastic adult players will almost certainly value children’s play more highly than those who see play as simply frivolous and unworthy. ‘Playfulness helps us be more inventive, smart, happy, flexible, and resilient. A sure (and fun) way to develop your imagination, creativity, problem-solving abilities, and mental health is to play with your romantic partner, officemates, children, grandchildren, and friends.’\(^\text{15}\) Playful adults, including early childhood educators, inspire playful, creative children.

As Stuart Brown suggests: ‘What do most Nobel Laureates, innovative entrepreneurs, and most successfully adapted mammals have in common? They play enthusiastically throughout their lives.’\(^\text{16}\) Consider also this assertion:

Life without play is a grinding, mechanical existence organized around doing the things necessary for survival. Play is the stick that stirs the drink. It is the basis of all art, games, books, sports, movies, fashion, fun, and wonder – in short, the basis of what we think of as civilization. Play is the vital essence of life.\(^\text{17}\)

For adults and children, Sutton-Smith notes the differences between play and work and claims: The opposite of play is not work, it is depression.\(^\text{18}\)

Sometimes adult play is dangerous; for example, extreme sports, such as sky-diving, activities perceived as having a high level of inherent danger and
risk. Extreme sports are about exhilaration and the control (or otherwise) of skill and danger. As Tricia David suggests:

\[\ldots\text{ in adulthood, play has a central role in the forming and sustaining of relationships. Much adult play may be rule-bound, but much is still free – think of young couples in the early stage of a relationship, or drama groups. Nobel scientists have remarked that their discoveries have often happened during playful imaginings with colleagues. Authors, painters, composers and entrepreneurs play with words, materials, notes and ideas and their work comes alive when they share it with others.}\]

Assessment and play

The younger the children the less likely they are to be able to tell you about themselves; for example, their likes, dislikes, relationships or learning styles. Observing, documenting and analysing children’s play is a means of assessing accurately different aspects of their development. For young children perceived to have ‘problems,’ play is used as the context for evaluating and determining any necessary interventions: ‘Play as an assessment/intervention context is relatively new in the field of school psychology but is increasingly popular with practitioners and researchers because of the current emphasis on ecologically valid assessments, context based interventions, and progress monitoring.’ Many different aspects can be assessed through play, such as communication skills, and physical, social and emotional development as well as cognitive functioning.

Assessment through play is an essential tool in the repertoire of excellent early childhood educators. It mainly takes three forms: summative, formative and ipsative, of which the latter two are most likely to be used in early education. Summative (normative) assessment tends to come at the end of a learning process and is associated with tests and school/setting comparisons. Formative assessment (criterion referenced) is part of the learning process and is ongoing and continuous, assessing the child against previous learning. Ipsative relates to assessment of children’s individual holistic development.

In some Western societies – for example, England and the US – assessment is often linked to audit and accountability, with a current emphasis on ‘readiness’ associated with preparation for school rather than the child’s current needs. Many Scandinavian countries and, in particular, the Reggio Emilia and Te Whāriki approaches (Italy and New Zealand, respectively), use ‘methods of assessment that challenge educators in positive ways. They have to look closely at what children are seeing, saying, doing and knowing in
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order to understand, celebrate and elaborate learning. The assessment then leads to new levels of challenge for children . . . worthwhile activities [which] offer and extend opportunities for holistic growth.22

While various psychological tools exist for the purpose of assessing children through play, in early childhood settings assessment often takes the form of observing play (with or without the use of electronic recording, e.g. cameras) and keeping records so as to assess progress and development. The use of children’s ‘Learning Journey’ logs and similar records of their play experiences is now widespread in early years settings. Some early educators also use a ‘Learning Journey Profile’ to record their playful interactions with children and reflect on the quality and outcomes of their playful pedagogies.23

The motivational aspects of play ensure the highest level of each child’s functioning. Assessment will usually involve those within the setting/school and parents in order to gain a full picture of the child’s play experiences and responses. The purposes of assessment through play are to link observation of children’s current levels of development with the planning cycle (see Diagram A1).

Diagram A1  Assessment and planning cycle
This cycle shows that, when educators understand children’s present knowledge and experiences, it is easier to decide what play experiences to provide. As educators assess children’s play, they are also reflecting on their own professional skills in knowing what works with individual children and how to provide for higher-quality play experiences.

**Autotelic activity**

Autotelic activity is any activity including play pursued for intrinsic, self-rewarding reasons. Autotelic play is play for its own sake without extrinsic reason or reward so a person does not play to win but plays for the challenge. Research shows that autotelic play enhances a child’s sense of agency and self-worth, which can advance skills in more formal areas as a child develops, particularly creativity and social interactions.24

**References**

18 REFERENCES


