How to... Encourage children’s participation: ensuring a good balance between adult-led and child-led activities
Child-led play is a style of play whereby children are given the freedom to choose what they play with; as well as how and when they do so. This is important for children’s learning and development, because children explore and learn from their own thoughts and ideas through the freedom and creativity that child-initiated play enables.

What is child-led play?

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What are the benefits of child-led play?

Child-led play provides the children with opportunities to develop important skills including:

- **Emotional development and empathy** - children are able to make their own choices and see things from other’s perspective.
- **Independence and self-expression** – for the first time in their young lives, this type of play gives the children a level of independence that cannot be provided by adult-led play.
- **Creative thinking and problem solving** - when left to their own devices, children’s creativity will be expressed through the way that they play.
- **Concentration** – particularly if using building blocks and making models - following their own interests which will naturally lead them to concentrate harder.
• **Social skills and socio-emotional development** - it helps children learn to share and cooperate without adult input or intervention.
• **Executive functioning** – helps develop the children’s working memory, flexible thinking and ability to self-regulate.

It’s worth remembering that while most children develop their play skills through observation and imitation, some children are not as capable of observing and imitating their peers. For such children, you may need to provide additional support to ensure that these children are given the same opportunities and those same play skills have a chance to develop.

### Does the adult have a role at all in child-led play?

Yes, absolutely. Adults can extend and support children’s play simply by engaging with them, talking to them about their play. We cover this in more detail later when we look at how you can do this with ‘effective questioning’. Simply put, by being involved, children learn that adults are invested in them and respect their play decisions.

The adult’s role is:

- To ensure that the environment is safe for the child to explore and test out their ideas.
- To know the child and be able to provide opportunities and resources for the child to use in their own way.
- To build solid relationships with children to fully enable the children to participate in child-led play.
- To create areas which allow children to build on their ideas and experiences.

We see and hear both the terms ‘child-led play’ and ‘child-initiated play’ and there is a subtle difference between. However, the main object is the same – to allow the children the freedom to explore and learn on their own.

Child-initiated play supports children in having ideas and being in control of their learning. Child-led activities may start out as an adult initiated activity - however by allowing the child space and time; the child may extend the resources and ideas given to create their own experience.

### What is adult-led play?

Adult-led play sessions are periods of free time or play in which adults play an active supporting role. This style of play is overseen by an adult, who will choose the game or activity as well as lead the cohort in it. Although they may not participate in the activity themselves, they will still be actively guiding and supporting the children throughout.
What are the benefits of adult-led play?

- It can help provide structure to a game or activity, with rules that are clearly defined from the outset.
- You can choose activities to cater for the needs, and improve the skills, of the particular age group you are with, e.g. hand-eye co-ordination or fine motor skills in younger children.
- Adult-led play also gives you, as the practitioner, a degree of control over the session and the ability to ensure every child feels included and is given a chance to play.
- Adult-led activities can also be structured to encourage co-operation and build positive peer relationships within your group.

Play Types and the EYFS Areas of Learning

Bob Hughes, a leading play activist and theorist suggests that there are 16 types of play which will be displayed in children as they go about their day-to-day play.

Here we take a closer look at these types of play, how they link to the EYFS Prime Areas of Learning and suggested activities which cover both child-led and adult-led play.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prime area of learning</th>
<th>Type of play</th>
<th>Activities can include</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal, social and emotional development</td>
<td>Rough and tumble Play: Children understand their own personal strengths and weaknesses: physical contact with other children can create bonds. Children who use this type of play are far more likely to understand physical boundaries to those who don’t.</td>
<td>Imaginary sword fighting, wrestling, contact sports, tag etc.</td>
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<td>Social Play: Understanding of other children’s emotions good or bad, children also learn about the consequences of different social interactions.</td>
<td>Telling jokes and/or stories. Group games and activities. Sharing information (this could be about their home life, how to use a toy or how to play a game).</td>
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<td>Communicative play: Interaction between children/adults/animals, this can be by using written, verbal or body language.</td>
<td>Children engaging in conversation, facial features like making faces e.g. sticking out your tongue. Singing songs and clapping games, trying out tongue twisters, writing notes/letters to each other, reacting to body language and learning what different non verbal expressions mean.</td>
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<td>Physical development</td>
<td>Locomotor Play: This type of play is to do with movement; it can be something as small as swinging on a tree, to playing a football game or running around. A good environment with varied landscapes enhances children's opportunities for play.</td>
<td>Rolling, jumping, running, climbing, stretching, walking, crawling, dancing, skipping etc.</td>
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<td>Dramatic Play: Children accentuate and explore their own characteristics in a very over the top type of play.</td>
<td>Performing, such as talent shows and dance routines, exaggerated games involving movements and behaviour.</td>
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<td>Object Play: Primarily using a wide variety of objects to create a play experience. Children may perhaps use objects in a purpose they are not designed for providing them with the flexibility to explore different uses (positive and negative) of an object, creating better understanding.</td>
<td>Playing with a ball, using toys in a way that they are not designed for. e.g. using a skipping rope as a snake, playing with stones, sticks, mud etc. Also playing with people, some children can treat people as objects, for example using partners to create an arch when playing oranges and lemons.</td>
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<td>Explorative Play: This type of play is from children’s natural sense of curiosity of the world around them. Children like to find out how things work and often will test an object/animal/people/environment themselves etc. to its limit. It is about finding boundaries, solving questions and understanding the world around them.</td>
<td>Puzzles, making dens, exploring the environment, creating imaginative games, seeing how high they can jump, using a toy/object in different way e.g. using a rope as a skipping rope then as a scary snake etc.</td>
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<td>Recapitulative Play: This type of play is more about a child’s basic and natural instinct. It helps children to practice fundamental skills that are important for living.</td>
<td>Cooking, building shelters, chasing, playing with the elements, play fighting etc.</td>
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<td>Deep Play: Children engage in play that makes them judge and assess their own risks. This type of play can help children understand their own mortality and help overcome any fears. It can strongly encourage self-confidence whilst ensuring life lessons are learnt.</td>
<td>Fire play, climbing trees, snowball fights, jumping over/in streams, using tools like saws, hammers and nails etc.</td>
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<td>Creative Play: Children can produce an idea or product in a way that is different and artistic by using their imagination and materials they find around them.</td>
<td>Arts and crafts, dens, games, woodwork, using a toy or object in a different way to which is was designed. Engaging in loose parts play e.g. using materials that have no specific use like cardboard box.</td>
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<td><strong>Socio-Dramatic Play</strong>: Children re-enacting situations that may have caused them concern or distress, this could be something as small as having an injection to parents arguing.</td>
<td>Imaginary games, playing with puppets and dolls, dressing up, copying behaviour they may have seen with other children e.g. if a child has seen a scary programme on television, they may try use it to scare other children.</td>
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<td><strong>Symbolic Play</strong>: This is when something that may seem insignificant to you is important to the child. It can be sentimental object or play that is very personal and means something to that child on a deeper level.</td>
<td>A drawing or picture that may seem to be a scribble, but are important places or people. Objects or toys that become special to the child and have a mean e.g. this flag represents freedom.</td>
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<td><strong>Mastery Play</strong>: This play focuses on what children do and do not have control of and how it makes them feel. E.g. catching crickets, holding back the tide etc. It’s to try to master.</td>
<td>Lighting fires, throwing stones in rivers, trying to understand the elements, forces and gravity.</td>
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### Expressive arts and design

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| Object Play: | Primarily using a wide variety of objects to create a play experience. Children may perhaps use objects in a purpose they are not designed for providing them with the flexibility to explore different uses (positive and negative) of an object, creating better understanding. |
| Symbolic Play: | This is when something that may seem insignificant to you is important to the child. It can be sentimental object or play that is very personal and means something to that child on a deeper level. |
| Fantasy and Imaginative Play: | Children act out what is in their mind. These can be things children have experienced through the media, or something that they see in real life and imagine what it is like. |

| Arts and crafts, dens, games, woodwork, using a toy or object in a different way to which it was designed. Engaging in Loose Parts play e.g. using materials that have no specific use. Like cardboard boxes, tyres, sticks, cables reels etc. |
| Dressing up, acting with dolls or toys, acting out scenes they may have seen e.g. a midwife giving an ultrasound to a child’s mother. |
| Playing with a ball, using toys in a way that they are not designed for. E.g. using a skipping rope as a snake, playing with stones, sticks, mud etc. Also playing with people, some children can treat people as objects, for example using partners to create an arch when playing oranges and lemons. |
| A drawing or picture that may seem to be a scribble, but are important places or people. Objects or toys that become special to the child and have a mean e.g. this flag represents freedom. |
| Fantasy play – being invisible. Imaginative Play – pretending to be a dog. |

### Extending children’s learning through adult-led effective questioning

We’ve explored ways and opportunities in which children can learn through their own child-led play which of course, comes completely natural to them. But how can we, as adults, enrich a child’s learning even further through the adult-led and initiated play?

The famous psychologist, Lev Vygotsky introduced a concept called ‘The Zone of Proximal Development’. This refers to the difference between what a child can do both with and without help. Whilst he believed in the importance of children developing spontaneously, he also claimed that children should not be left to discover everything on their own. Instead, we should provide them with challenges that are slightly too hard for them and gently ‘pull them along’.

**Based on this theory, we should let children learn through play, then extend their learning even further. A way of doing this which gives us a wonderful window into the children’s minds is through ‘effective questioning’.**
Because children need the opportunity to play an active part in their own learning, we should be mindful that we don’t just give them experience of ‘directed learning’ (i.e. telling them what to do), but in addition, let some of their tasks be open-ended – we could, for example, let them take their learning through play where they want to take it!

As the children are playing, this gives us the chance to go in and extend their learning through gentle challenges.

A few examples of these effective challenges/questions could be:

- Can you tell me how you made that?
- Why is the ice melting?
- How could you make the tower even taller?
- What do you need to do to make the car go faster?
- What does the rabbit feel like?
- How is that person feeling?
- How could you make your friend feel happier?

Effective questioning can give you some particularly great observations in the areas of Understanding the World and Communication and Language. When questioning the children, try not to limit their learning. Try to encourage them to take it wherever they want to – this may not be exactly what you had in mind but if you trust the child to create their own learning path and then challenge them along the way – you could be pleasantly surprised by the outcome!

**Sources and Resources:**

- Optimus Education
- *Play Types: Speculations and Possibilities (2006)* By Bob Hughes
- Twinkl teaching resources
- Earlyyearscareer.com
SOFTWARE

NURSERY MANAGEMENT - ABACUS
- Save hours by reducing planning time by 50%
- Speedy invoicing to all parents and carers in minutes
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- Reduce your workload and spend more time with the children
- Identify at a glance each child's development pathway

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- Share every magical moment of each child's day with their parents and carers with our online diary software

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- Download Parent Portal App on Android or iOS

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- We collect fees, allowing you to focus on childcare, not credit control
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SOFTWARE

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- We assist you with setting up and using your social media accounts in no time to help you increase your setting's visibility

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