

Open-ended play

THE FOUNDATION OF LEARNING



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community playthings

Joy is the soul of every



activity of childhood.

Friedrich Froebel





Introduction

Ben Kingston-Hughes

Curiosity is a funny old thing. Children have the innate desire to touch, taste, smell, and explore pretty much everything in their environments. This sensory exploration of the world is how children make connections, and it is fundamentally important for their development. There is another sort of curiosity though – the uniquely human curiosity that makes children fascinated by dinosaurs, buildings, sea creatures or clouds, and tank engines. This kind of curiosity is birthed not from an instinctive desire to explore, but from the uniquely human capacity to find awe and wonder in our world. I believe that as early educators we need to engage both types of curiosity in our children: the wonderful visceral feeling of sensory play, and the awe and wonder at the amazingness of our world.

Open-ended play contains the broadest range of experiences for our children. The physical sensations of manipulating and exploring a variety of resources are combined with the uniquely human ability to see possibilities, imagine, and create something new. When children follow their own ideas and interests through

open-ended play, they are creatively problem-solving in a way that no amount of screen-based interactions come close to.

I could go on about how neurologically rich open-ended play is. I could look at how these experiences stimulate a virtual fireworks display of brain growth and underpin a broad range of development for our children. I could highlight how open-ended play is linked to creative problem-solving, leadership skills, social aspirations, and even cultural capital. But proof of its profound impact comes from children themselves. When I see children engaged in open-ended play, I see them transform into inventors, scientists, artists, sculptors and innovators. Most importantly though, I see them become children again. When given the freedom to explore interesting resources on their own terms, they really feel alive. That is ultimately what open-ended play gives to children: moments of joy. I believe it is every child's fundamental right to experience that joy. So go on, read this booklet, stock up on interesting resources and see what joy you can bring to your children!



Stepping stones

Alice Sharp

If you're concerned about whether open-ended play still has a place in our jam-packed curriculums, consider this: it's an approach that can be applied to any subject in any setting. Rather than an isolated activity, open-ended play is the ideal form of child-led learning and can be incorporated into every space. As you explore the various environments where children learn and play, here are some stepping stones to guide you.

What is play?

Play is not just recreation for children – it's their approach to life! Every action they take engages their mind, body, and spirit. Play is essential for children's well-being as it enables them to explore the world, express themselves, and cope with challenges.

As Jean Piaget stated, "Play is the important work of childhood." This sentiment resonates across the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), because nothing stimulates brain development and imagination quite like play. Engaging all five senses, play absorbs children in activity, developing confidence and independence.

Though children's play appears spontaneous, it's complex and diverse. One type that

prevails across cultures is open-ended play, where children dictate what they play, how, and with which materials. Open-ended means "allowing for future change; not having a fixed method or prescribed outcome". Freed from the fear of failure, children become immersed in deep play. For adults, observing this type of open-ended play can offer unique insights into children's rich thinking.

Materials for play

When it comes to materials, children perceive the world differently from adults. Humble everyday items such as a sheet hanging out to dry can have infinite possibilities. Children need materials and opportunities to apply their own logic. The best resources for open-ended play are often simple and ambiguous. They won't come in an attractive subscription kit pushed through your post-box by enterprising profiteers. In an insta-perfect world, the pressure to have a good-looking result can take all the fun out of the process. The joy – and all the learning – is in the journey, and the value is not in the materials but in the play and creativity they inspire.

According to Margaret McMillan, "Most of the best opportunities for achievement



lie in the domain of free play, with access to varied materials.” These materials need not be complicated or fancy. Sophisticated resources tend to thwart true play; children often become bored with prescribed games or mesmerized by electronic paraphernalia.

Where detail is built in, children’s ideas cannot freely guide the play. Elaborate costumes for every TV character usurp a child’s imagination. Old hats, shoes, handbags, and fabric pieces will serve the drama corner richly and set the scene for deconstructed role-play. With a tea cosy and a stick, a child can be a firefighter now and conduct an orchestra later.

Home corners are often supplied with artificial fruit and veg, but a plastic lemon can never be anything but a lemon. Open-ended materials such as sand, dough, clay, acorns, corks, lids, mud, and scraps of cloth become anything a child envisions. The simpler the props, the more versatile they are, supporting play that is sustained over time.

Play needs time

Although open-ended play is time-consuming, every second of it is worthwhile. Children who have always been told what to do, or are lamentably labelled “iPad kids”, may need time to get

involved in open-ended play. Allow them that time, free of pressure. As they observe other children spontaneously engaged, they will gradually be drawn into the action. All children have latent curiosity and imagination; once these are stimulated, each experience suggests another. Ideas multiply, confidence grows, and creative play becomes self-perpetuating.

Even children who are familiar with open-ended play need lots of time to experiment, discover, create and re-create. Children live in their play; the more engrossed they are, the more frustrating interruptions become. Considering all the satisfaction and learning it engenders, open-ended play warrants the longest possible periods.

The teacher's role in play

Observation is at the heart of effective early years practice. Children provide insights into their understanding as they set goals, negotiate, and experiment. The unfiltered emotions and conversations generated by free play hold the keys for assessing development.

Listening in as children think aloud during block play or small-world play allows teachers to enhance or extend the activity. Observing a child's journey, the teacher sprinkles subtle prompts like fairy dust, introducing new materials or concepts through open questions. Some children may not have experienced open-ended play or been actively "taught" not to use things other than for their intended purpose. By modelling creative behaviours teachers can inspire a more imaginative approach.

How do children know they are allowed to use the cardboard box for lots of different purposes until they see their key worker wearing it as a hat?

An indispensable part of children's play is the presence of a trusted practitioner to whom they can turn with difficulties, or share the joy of discovery. Being both inconspicuous and available, knowing when to guide and when to unobtrusively observe, is the educator's genius.

Marcella carefully constructed this square box saying softly to herself, "I'm building a nest for Me!" When she'd finished, her teacher asked her what items she'd like in her nest, and supported her journey of self-discovery.





Nature-based learning environment

Alice Sharp

The mess is worth it. To live a creative life, we must lose our fear of being wrong; also our fear of making a mess. One great antidote to the torment of tidy-up is outdoor play.

Nature has a forgiving attitude toward mess. It provides endless scope for open-ended play and fosters emotional well-being. Children's favourite climbing frames are trees, boulders and logs, which through imagination become mountains, horses, fishing boats, castles and fire engines. The freedom of the outdoors encourages expansive movement and promotes health.

Water in any form is tremendously attractive. Even without a stream, children discover rainwater in puddles or hollow stumps to splash. They love mixing magic potions with twigs, leaves and flower petals.

Forest and beach schools have access to a wide variety of children's "treasures": fir cones and conkers, or pebbles and seashells. Under the roots of trees, they set up playgrounds for pixies and leprechauns, or tiny flats with moss cushions and seedpod dishes. And everyone has seen sand castles at the beach decorated with bottle caps, seashells and bits of glass, or in the sandpit adorned with daisies and



buttercups. When children create these small worlds, they are the "big people" controlling what happens.

The great outdoors is the place where taking risks gives rise to problem-solving, and trial and error inspire creativity.

Yesterday my children decided the fallen tree was a chocolate factory. Each broken branch was a tap for melted chocolate!



Baby room environment

Lynn McNair

Children are whole beings whose thoughts, feelings and actions are interrelated. Young children learn in a holistic way and learning should never be compartmentalised, for everything is interlinked. From this, the power of open-ended resources can be understood (The Froebel Trust, 2021).

Infants learn best in dynamic, active social contexts, a fact that fascinates both adults and other children. Learning starts from birth when babies use all their senses to explore their surroundings. Open-ended play is critical in childhood as it enhances children's active participation and allows them to construct their own unique worlds. With open-ended materials, children can deconstruct, explore and create, as opposed to a conventional transmissive model of all children doing the same activity at the same time.

“A fundamental shift away from toys which leave little room for imagination, towards more natural and open-ended resources is reflected in a fundamental shift in the quality of the children's play” (Gill, N.D).

Infants show considerable interest and engagement when exploring tactile objects found in “treasure baskets.” As they grow, they move on to explore what

they can do with objects. They appear compelled to collect, post, transport, fill, dump, stack, and knock down. Many household items and utensils facilitate these natural experiences. Through heuristic play, children experiment and learn for themselves what happens when they combine items in different ways (Goldschmied and Jackson, 2004).





Mini-Unit E

At our nursery, Moira is new to heuristic play and appears unsure how to interact with the rings, pegs, and blocks. She expects them to perform like regular toys. She keeps returning, however; her curiosity is piqued, and we believe that with support and guidance, she will thrive and become fully involved in a few days.

When children encounter blocks in the construction area, they may first acquaint themselves with the shapes and play with them as individual pieces. Eventually, a child will begin to stack and then create. Pat Gura writes, “Repetition appears to be an important feature of materials mastery. As each block form is discovered, there is much refining and variation within the familiar. A particular block form may be constructed so often that the procedure becomes effortless.” (*Exploring Learning, Young Children, and Block play*)

As children grow, they continue to explore and create at their own pace. Froebel believed in the child’s innate wisdom; rather than instruct, practitioners should stimulate children’s self-activity (Lawrence, 1952; Wollons, 2000). Children discover

meaningful experiences when given the freedom to follow their interests, which leads to great satisfaction and opportunities for independent thinking.





Indoor environment

Daniel Spry

When children access indoor construction and small-world areas, they can set up an environment with blocks and use miniature figures to act out their experiences and fantasies.

Ian is recreating, in detail, a village mapped in his favourite storybook. He could not have drawn this map with pencil and paper, because his mark-making skills are not yet that advanced. However, with blocks, he is amazingly adept. If he did not have this means by which to express his ideas, adults would have no way of knowing that Ian has an entire map memorised in his mind!

Problem-solving

It's usually best to stand back and let children solve their problems with minimal adult intervention. This approach enables children to find their own solutions. A four-year-old in block play wanted to build a bridge but seemed unable to figure out how to get the blocks to balance. His teacher could have demonstrated in an instant but held back and observed. The child eventually moved to other activities, but the challenge must have worked in his mind overnight because when he returned to the block corner the next day, he quickly placed the blocks and built bridges all over



the room. He had cracked the problem and made the learning his own.

Initially young children may require support from skilled practitioners to encourage their engagement with blocks. Over time, if left free to experiment, children start using the blocks to construct interesting patterns or purposeful projects – not only roads and houses but imaginary ideas as well. Completion of structures is not the end of the play. Children often decorate a tower with beads, buttons, scraps of cloth,



pinecones, coloured yarn – whatever is accessible. They might use little vehicles and human or animal figures to enact their thoughts. Sometimes these figures are just clothespins or plasticine people.

With a new group of children, various sizes of blocks can be attractively laid out in the construction area. Give them time to become deeply involved before bringing in baskets of natural materials, small figures and vehicles. Waiting until the children

are fully engaged with the blocks allows the added accessories to enhance the experience instead of taking away from it.

Literacy

Block play is an avenue for early storytelling, as children weave narratives while constructing. Children initially playing side by side on separate constructions often interact in conversation and begin to play together, developing confidence while speaking and listening to each other.

Children may play alone or with others (EYFS). Younger children initially play by themselves. Blocks help them to build relationships alongside each other, and eventually share the space and the resources together.

I just told my Year Two class a fairy tale, and now they are busy in the construction area. Megan is using blocks to “draw” a knight flat on the floor. Elinor and Chloe have built a castle and now are making paper tickets so they can charge admission. Daniel and Ye-Seung are constructing a dragon. Its curving tail extends across the room. Its jaws of up-ended ramps are full of small wooden figures – the “knights” the dragon has devoured!

Mathematics

Initially, mathematical thinking develops as children experiment with the size, shape, and weight of the blocks, experiencing forces and the effects of gravity. As the rules of physics are internalised, they master concepts of stability, proportion, design and symmetry. They are also experiencing, first hand, concepts such as volume, area,



distance and even addition and subtraction as they add or remove blocks.

Ideally, constructions should be kept intact until children are ready to move on; they love to develop a theme or project over several days. But if structures must be cleared away, it is important to acknowledge them first – one child celebrated his castle by dancing around it, then he was okay with dismantling it. Some settings photograph constructions so children can show their parents.





Outdoor playground environment

Ali McClure

Where small construction enables children to build miniature worlds, large construction empowers them to create environments they can actually inhabit. Whether indoors or out, large construction allows children to become the actors; construction and role play complement each other, providing opportunities for total involvement.

Understanding the world

Children have to experience play physically and emotionally. They begin with their personal experiences and extend them to build up ideas, concepts, and skills. While playing, children can express fears and overcome anxious experiences (EYFS).

The children are playing “family” in the garden. Kate as Mummy is tucking her twig children into bed. Liam as Dad picks up a stick “to slice the bread for supper.” Kate, horrified, snatches it – “You can’t cut that one! It’s the baby!” She hands him a different piece of wood – “That’s a loaf of bread!” – and the play continues harmoniously.

Outdoor Blocks

Many settings have a covered outdoor area where children can engage in large construction year-round. Outlast blocks

can be used and left outdoors all year round. Because they interlock, children can build on uneven ground and return to their construction day after day.

Free and found resources such as cardboard boxes, pallets, planks, cardboard tubes, tires, and gutters can be great additions to block play. Broom handles stuck into traffic cones or buckets of sand make good frames for some structures. Fabrics are essential roofing material. Keep an eye out for big cable reels, large quantities of the same item, and other manufacturing cast-offs.

Building “shops” is a favourite. Today after erecting the shop with blocks and planks, some of the children put together a cash register from various oddments and then decided to make money, which they carefully drew and cut from bits of paper and cardboard. It’s important to have plenty of blocks, as children get frustrated if resources run out. They cannot play freely when they feel compelled to guard their materials. But if the supply is plentiful, they can focus on carrying out their plans.

Physical development

Large movements are key for young children’s development. Construction is a fun way to get physical exercise and a sense of balance. Some children love



“heavy work”, and while their muscles gain strength, their communication skills, understanding of the world, aesthetic appreciation, and confidence grow as well.

For fine motor development, add clipboards, papers, pencils, and measuring tapes. Chalks, paintbrushes and mud introduce gross-motor mark-making.

We have many children in class this year who love making racing cars. We encourage them to make number plates and road signs, so we get lots of maths and writing in that way.

Communication and language

Karen Miller says that block play “could really form the core of your curriculum. Everything could be built around blocks.”

Colleen Marin, who compiled *Writing in the Air*, believes that block play helps develop oral and writing skills. Young children gain confidence as they express their ideas with blocks. This leads to verbal self-expression which precedes written language.

The children started first with a boat. Then it quickly changed into an aeroplane, and then a rocket, and finally into a pirate ship. The boy leading was really interested in Peter Pan. He was looking for sharks in the water, and the girl was looking through a telescope to see what she could see. They sustained their play and could have gone on even longer. They were working together; they were problem-solving.

Personal, social and emotional

Loris Malaguzzi of Reggio Emilia pointed out that children are “not excessively attached to their own ideas, which they construct and re-invent continuously. They are apt to explore, make discoveries, and change their points of view.” Anyone who has watched children building, and re-building, will agree. But the building phase – though so important – just sets the stage for role play. Children dash indoors to bring out blankets, dishes, or other accessories – and the activity takes a momentum of its own. This is play at its highest. As Jean Piaget said, “Dramatic play permits children to fit the reality of the world into their own interests and knowledge and contributes strongly to their intellectual development.”

My children belong to a farming community, and much of their play reflects this. Today they all worked together, using hollow blocks to build a barn with a surrounding paddock. Since Emmy was a cow, she did not help – but she told the others exactly where to build her fence! Then several children constructed horses of varying sizes all over the porch. Jessica was sitting on a structure that looked quite different. She whispered, “I made a unicorn!”

Dens

One universal form of large construction is building dens. “Children find something thrilling in creating their special place, somewhere on their scale where the grown-ups can’t go. Making dens usually involves taking the sofa apart, or draping old blankets over upturned chairs, but children

also love to build outdoor dens.” (Fiona Danks in *Nature’s Playground*)

Helen Tovey writes, “Children create their own secret places, known variously as bush houses, cubbies, dens, forts or camps often in undefined, ‘in between’ and ‘left over’ spaces. These small, secret worlds are calm, ordered, and reassuringly secure. They allow for privacy, imagination, and temporary ownership, and are important ways that children can feel a sense of agency in shaping and creating their special place, making their mark on the world.” (*Playing Outdoors: Spaces and Places, Risk and Challenge*).

In *Nursery World*, Helen Bilton emphasizes that den-building “is a pastime that generation after generation has enjoyed... But a den can only be a den if it is allowed to be an open-ended process that enables children to dictate the direction of the play... All the great designs of this world came about through a process, through trial and error, involving the making and rectifying of mistakes, standing back, pondering, and considering. Den building can make the environment look messy, but the best outdoor environment is a workshop, where lots of creations are happening...”

I’ve noticed that children’s outdoor dens are often under a bush or in a tree, where light filtering through leafy branches lends a special feel. I brought some saris for my children to use with their hollow block constructions because they allow light through in a similar way and soften corners.



Emotional & cognitive environment

Lynn McNair

Friedrich Froebel, a German educator who pioneered the concept of kindergarten, once said that “Play is the highest level of child development. It is the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling.” He describes how children develop a sense of what is beautiful through play.

Expressive arts and design

Imagination, the ability to override the boundary between reality and fantasy, is an attribute of childhood worldwide. Focusing on the process of creating art enables children to discover their skills and abilities without feeling pressure to create a particular thing. Imagination should be encouraged; it is the key to empathy.

Albert Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” Through their imaginations, children create, design, and become storytellers. Open-ended play gives imagination free rein.

Lively music is playing in the art corner. Leonard, age five, takes crayons and draws a figure with three legs. Rhianna, next to him, protests – but Leonard responds, “Well, sometimes when you dance you feel like you have three legs!”



Mark-making

Research has shown that mark-making is crucial for a child’s holistic learning. As children begin to use and make symbols, they express their inner thoughts and ideas to create meaning (Froebel Trust, 2021). Critical thinking is a key component. Fine motor skills, eye-hand coordination, and creative representation are all being developed. Many children are fascinated with repeating patterns and creating intricate designs.



Four-year-old Sonia surveyed the Help-yourself trolley. She cut a short length of blue yarn and brought it to the table. She took the paper punch and made holes around a sheet of paper, then began to thread her yarn through the holes – but found it wasn't long enough. Sonia cut a piece of yellow yarn which she carefully tied to the first bit. In the end, Sonia used five pieces of yarn, each a different colour, to thread in and out. Only when she reached the last hole and was puzzled about how to finish, did she turn to her teacher for help. Next Sonia found a glossy brochure, leafed through it, chose some pictures, and carefully cut out and glued them to her yarn-bordered paper. She held the result at arm's length, studying it with satisfaction.

Sonia's teacher discovered how imagination, competence, and independence can flourish when resources and tools are accessible in the creative art area. Sonia, for instance, showed exceptional skill in creating and following her own plans which resulted in a strong sense of pride in her efforts.

For young children, a keen interest or passion is the most powerful driver of learning. Creativity can take many forms and usually starts with exploratory play that eventually evolves into diverse creative pursuits. While the process is the priority for young children, the finished product becomes increasingly important for older children. Nonetheless, there is a common thread that runs through these stages of creativity – the child takes the lead and follows their innate curiosity.

When children are self-motivated, they have remarkable focus and persistence. The notion of children's short attention span is dispelled when their inspiration comes from within!

Wet and messy play

Children need to see and feel the world to make sense of it. All five senses are members of the expedition, with taste leading the charge for the youngest! Messy play, the open-ended exploration of materials and their properties, offers one of the most fully integrated learning experiences young children can have. Allowing children to experiment at their developmental level and pace leads to superior learning.





Mud kitchens and sandpits are excellent outdoor environments for messy play as they expose children to numerous opportunities for sensory stimulation, curiosity and wonder. Children can also engage in messy play indoors, where a highly defined space is easy to clean and allows for similar exploratory play.

Clay, being open-ended and natural, encourages children to use their imagination. By simply squeezing, squashing, or twisting the clay, children can change its shape to keep pace with their lively imaginations.

Sensory play

“Early childhood educators cannot overstate the importance of sensory play in the educational process. It is the foundation of all the skills children will use in school: learning to read, write, and solve math and science problems. Once children have these experiences, they can draw upon the body memory and cognitive memory of their experiences when faced with new situations.” (Butcher and Pletcher 2016)

Sensory play has a way of inviting children with diverse abilities onto a level playing field that allows relationships to develop. What might begin as parallel play with a common interest can progress into communication on the highest levels.

Conclusion

“Don’t limit a child to your own learning, for he was born in another time”
(Rabindranath Tagore, n.d.).

To retain their sense of wonder, children need adults who honour the way they learn. Children of all ages should have abundant time for active open-ended play, during which they take initiative, think creatively, wrestle with challenges and forge friendships. A wealth of open-ended play can build a foundation of confidence that enables children to take responsibility and meet life with determination and joy.





A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful,
full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune
that for many of us that clear-eyed vision, that true
instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is
dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood.
If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed
to preside over the christening of all children,
I should ask that her gift to each child in the world
be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would
last throughout life. Rachel Carson

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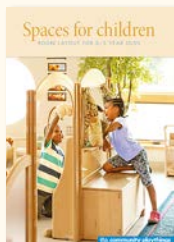
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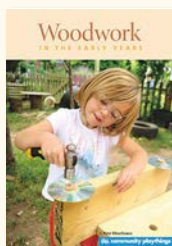
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