

## Podcast transcript: Developing play

**Arlene** Welcome to this podcast on play. This is part of a series of NCCA podcasts on early childhood care and education. You can find more information and more podcasts at [www.action.ncca.ie](http://www.action.ncca.ie). Today I'm talking to Dr Elizabeth Wood from the University of Exeter about how practitioners use play to support children's learning and development. In other words, *what do I do with play, and how do I do it?* Elizabeth you're very welcome.

### **Can I start with asking you to tell us a little bit about yourself?**

**Elizabeth** I'm a professor of Education at the University of Exeter. I originally trained, many years ago, as an early childhood teacher and I've had experience of working with 6 and 7 year old children and with pre-school aged children as well. I've had a long-standing fascination with play and have studied play from the perspective of how practitioners use it in their settings and also how children use play for their own purposes.

**Arlene** ***Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* shows the potential of quality play to support deep and meaningful learning for children. But as is well documented, and indeed noted by practitioners, this can give rise to some fundamental questions about play in a learning environment. Questions such as, *how as a practitioner, do I actually do this play?* So I am delighted Elizabeth that you're joining me today to try to answer these and other questions about using play to support deep learning for children. To start with, what is play in an educational context?**

**Elizabeth** Thank you Arlene. I always think it's interesting that when we talk about something being child's play we mean that it's easy, simple even. But after many years of working with young children and studying play as a researcher there is nothing easy or nothing simple about play, or indeed planning for play. Play really is rocket science and I think that practitioners do have a lot of interesting and quite challenging issues to get to grips with when they're planning for good quality play.

So first of all I think we need to take a pragmatic view of play. In educational settings, all play is structured to some extent by the environment, the rules and

routines, the time, the space and the resources available for play. It's also structured by the roles that adults take within the setting and the beliefs and values that adults hold about play. So by taking an educational approach to play, we've come to expect that we can use play in intentional ways to support children's learning and development. But, there is one important thing to remember. We can plan FOR children's play, but we cannot plan children's play. For play to be play, practitioners must create the conditions that support play and learning. This means sustaining the potential for children to make their own choices, allowing flexibility for the play to develop in ways that are decided by the children, ensuring time and space for them to invent their own plans and activities, and providing scope for them to create and solve their own problems and challenges. In particular, practitioners need to ensure that children have time for their play to develop in complexity. This means that continuity across early childhood settings can be ensured by sustaining the conditions that support learning and playing.

So let's look at some of these ideas in a little bit more detail. When we think about planning our provision, we should be aiming towards developing integrated pedagogical approaches. This is shown in a diagram on Slide 3 and involves creating a continuum between the following characteristics of provision.

- First we need to think about structure and flexibility. Within the overall provision, practitioners structure the environment and resources in ways that allow flexibility. This can be as simple as allowing children to combine resources, such as using small-world figures in the block play area.
- Additionally where space allows children should have open access to indoor and outdoor environments so that they can move between different modes and forms of play.
- We also need to create a continuum between adult-directed and child-initiated activities which is shown clearly in Slide 3. We know that high quality provision includes a mix of adult-directed and child-initiated activities. This means that practitioners sometimes take the lead in planning activities with intentional learning outcomes. Practitioners can also plan for children to initiate and lead their own activities within well-resourced environments. They can then plan responsively, by picking up and extending children's ideas and interests. This does not mean planning separate activities for every child in the setting. Practitioners

can plan for whole group activities, for small group activities, and allow children to follow their own interests and ideas within and through all the provision that's available in the setting.

- We need to get a balance between freedom and control. This means giving children the time and the freedom to choose their own activities. But again going back to this idea of structure, their freedom always takes place within the environment, within the time that is available and within certain rules that have to operate within the settings such as taking care of everyone.
- We also need to think about getting a mix, or a balance of guided play and open-ended play. Sometimes children need to experience guided play where practitioners help them to master the skills that they need to explore materials, to play a game, maybe to join in a play activity. Maybe children need some guidance to learn how to build with different materials, or use a new computer programme, or ride a bike. So practitioners do have an important role in guiding children towards the skills that can help them to become more competent in their play. Through observation practitioners can decide when, and how to interact with a child or a group of children to support their learning. So if we look at the diagram on page 3 in Zone 1 or adult initiated activities, we can see that these would mostly fall in the category of work, non-play or structured or guided play. If we look at the other side, which is playfulness and pure play, it's more likely that pure play or open-ended play will occur when children have the time and the freedom to take the activity in their own directions, to use and combine materials in inventive ways and to develop their own roles and rules. But we must also remember that children in their child-initiated activities might also choose activities that are much more like work. Some children love to do sums, some children love to write or to use a computer programme. So we mustn't get too hung up on this dichotomy or difference between work and play. Rather, if we use integrated pedagogical approaches we should be able to see a continuum between adult-initiated activities and child-initiated activities, and between structured play and pure play.

**Arlene**      **So then how does play 'fit' or work with a curriculum? How does a practitioner use play alongside learning goals as we have in *Aistear* or**

**perhaps even alongside content objectives as we have in our *Primary School Curriculum (1999)*?**

**Elizabeth** We know that play is unpredictable. And it can take off in so many directions that practitioners often worry about whether they can make any connections at all between play and learning in the curriculum areas. This is where we get back to the idea of structure and flexibility and we can think about two approaches to this problem of relating play to the curriculum, and to learning objectives. First of all we can think about planning for curriculum-led play, and, planning for play-led curriculum. This continues the theme of integrated pedagogical approaches which we've just discussed.

In curriculum-led play, practitioners can plan activities that are focused on introducing, consolidating or extending children's skills, knowledge and understanding across all the areas of learning in *Aistear*. Learning intentions can also be linked to children's interests, to the ongoing topic, maybe to a festival or celebration, or perhaps to an unusual event (such as a dramatic volcanic eruption).

With younger children, we can track their interests by close observation of their activities, their body language, facial expressions and responses. If a toddler shows interest in touching and feeling different textures, then a treasure basket can be an ideal way of offering familiar and new materials and objects. For older children, topics or themes can be used to structure learning activities, which may last for a few days or for a few weeks. The important principle here is that practitioners should not try to link all activities to one topic, and that topics should change when children's interests tail off. I want to illustrate some of these ideas about curriculum-led play and play-led curriculum in the following slide.

You can see here an illustration that was done by the teacher linked to the theme of using the story of Little Red Riding Hood. This slide shows us the combination of teacher-planned activities and child-planned activities. In curriculum-led play the teacher planned many different activities for the 5 and 6-year-old children in her Year 1 class. Linked to the story was the idea of a police officer, that's a real police officer, coming into the school asking for a description of the wolf. This led to much playful, imaginative and creative writing that the children did by hand and on the computer. They generated their own character descriptions of the wolf, what he looked like, where they think he lived and where they think he'd been spotted: for example in the local shops, in their back

gardens and even in the children's bedrooms. So this stimulated lots of different ideas about writing about the wolf. In the child-led curriculum children then planned their own activities. These were linked to representing their meanings and their understanding of the story. The teacher made available lots of different multi-modal ways of representing the children's knowledge and experiences. This included clay, Plasticine, fabrics, feathers and other materials. The children had open and free access to the materials and planned how they wanted to represent, develop and extend the story. So this shows how curriculum led-play and play-led curriculum can actually work together in a continuous flow of activities where the teacher plans intentional teaching objectives and also plans responsively around the children's own ideas and their own learning journeys.

**Arlene**      **Elizabeth, are there then certain pre-requisites or things that a practitioner needs to have in place in his/her setting or room to enable children to learn and develop through play?**

**Elizabeth**      Yes I think there are many ways in which practitioners can ensure that children have high quality play experiences. We've already talked about the importance of planning the play/learning environment. This is one of the key ways in which practitioners can support play, both indoors and outdoors. But remember the key issue – plan for structure and flexibility! This involves providing a range of resources and tools, including junk materials that can become anything that the children choose. I know that parents are often familiar with the phenomenon that children play more with the cardboard box at Christmas than they do with the expensive toy. But it's really important to have this flexibility - lengths of fabric, old building materials that are safe to use, huge cardboard boxes. They can be the stuff of very powerful cognitive transformations for children.

Try to allow children to combine materials across different areas, for example using small world figures with large blocks. This means that they can have some flexibility in where they take different materials and resources. I think it's also important to have an open-ended 'designing and making' area that has different materials and tools for joining and fixing. This is really important for helping children to make their own props, especially for role-play and imaginative play. Sometimes children are quite happy to step out of their play in order to make a hat, or a toy. And they will often go back into their play and enrich and extend their activities.

You also need to ensure that all adults in the setting are using the repeating cycle of planning, observing, discussing and reflecting. Notice what is happening in specific areas, what's happening for the children – for groups and for individuals. It is only by being expert observers that we can develop a finely tuned understanding of the meaning of play to children and how we can offer continuous challenge, development and extension.

And importantly, one of the pre-requisites is that you develop your own play and playfulness so that you can extend your own role. Which brings us to the next important question...

**Arlene** **Indeed, that question being what as a practitioner do I actually do when the children are playing. Can you tell us a little bit more about this Elizabeth?**

**Elizabeth** It's often the case that practitioners believe that once the environment and the resources have been planned for the children that their job is really to stand back and not be involved in children's play. But research shows us consistently that adults can have important roles in playing with, and playing alongside children in ways that are sensitive and respectful of children's play. So, it's important to think about the sort of roles that you think are appropriate in your setting. First of all, you need to plan time for observing children's activities, and for recording and discussing your observations with the team. This will help you to plan sensitively and plan responsively so what happens in the setting this week will inform the planning for next week.

Plan time for being involved with children to support their learning and development. This can be intentional, for example, you might plan to teach a group of children how to play a game. Responsive planning can mean taking on a role when children invite you into their imaginative play. You can still observe and listen when you are involved and interacting with the children, but try to go with the flow of children's intentions. It's often the case that when adults are invited into children's play that they go into question and answer mode and they say things like, *how many cups of tea do we need? Shall we put the yellow cup with the yellow saucer? Can you count how many spoons?* This is because we're often trying to assess and understand children's acquisition of knowledge when they're playing. I think it's much more important to go with the flow of what children are saying and doing and thinking. You can use these responsive

opportunities for thinking about what are the next steps in planning activities for the children, and remember, planning activities with the children. An important issue here is that practitioners help children to make connections across areas of learning and experience. Checking their knowledge and understanding might happen in teacher-led group time activities and then the adults can plan responsively to create activities that will promote extension and challenge. Remember that children enjoy learning new skills and new knowledge, and gaining a sense of mastery by using and applying them in their play. By observing children at play practitioners can identify their ideas and interests, help children to make props and plan activities that will extend and enrich their play. For older children practitioners might support an extended project that develops over time.

**Arlene** **One of the very practical questions a practitioner might have about play is, *how much time should I give to it?***

**Elizabeth** Children do need a lot of dedicated time for play, and as much flexibility as possible to flow between indoor and outdoor activities. Research studies have shown us that in role play (which is a particularly complex form of play), young children of around about 4-5 years old typically need around 45 minutes to develop sustained sequences of play. This enables them to gather their play partners, organise the activities, develop the characters, plots and events. If time is too tightly structured such as moving children around a carousel of activities in twenty-minute phases, they will not have time to engage in or develop their own activities. And this may mean they are missing out on the complexity of role play and imaginative play. Older children from around 4 or 5 years old will need time to return to projects that are related to their play such as building props and resources. Younger children may appear to flit from one activity to another. This can mean different things. For example, it may mean that they need time with an adult to help them to develop their interests. Or through observations, the practitioner may see they may be developing patterns of activities relating to emerging interests. So sustained periods of time are important for young children, and for older children in the primary school.

**Arlene** **As you mentioned yourself, Elizabeth, children usually love to play but how can practitioners be sure they are actually learning? How can they**

**ensure they are learning right across the curriculum as well?**

**Elizabeth** We've already talked about the importance of the repeating cycle of planning, observing, discussing and reflecting amongst all team members. This is the best way to ensure that children are gaining the most benefit from the play provision. So for example, if you notice that some children repeatedly go to the same activity, then observe what they're doing, pose some questions about why this might be happening, and then try out some possible strategies that might introduce challenge and extension for the children. It may be that one child needs some confidence to have a go at something different. Another child may be shy and need support to connect with other children. Some children avoid messy play. So how can you perhaps try to engage them in different forms of messy play? Some children avoid noisy or boisterous play. This may simply be because they are quiet and they don't like those forms of play, or that they don't have strategies to access those forms of play.

Remember that you can provide different opportunities for children to develop and refine similar skills. Drawing, small world play and block play all promote fine motor skills. Also, one activity can serve many purposes. Role-play activities develop imagination, language, communication, friendship skills, and conflict resolution. Structured games such as Ludo promote turn-taking and learning about rules, as well as mathematical knowledge about counting, ordering, numeral recognition and matching. So it's really about remembering the importance of structure and flexibility - observing, discussing, reflecting and planning, and making connections across areas of learning experiences for the children, and with the children.

**Arlene** **And linked to this is the whole area and importance of progression in children's learning? How can practitioners plan for progression in children's learning through play?**

**Elizabeth** Many people think that once children have left the pre-school setting that they have really got play out of their system, and that what they are really ready for is lots of work. I would argue that children also need more challenging play. If we look at Slide 5 the research tells us that play progresses along pathways of increasing complexity. From around about the age of 4, play becomes more orderly, more rule-bound and more organised. We often see that children are able to sustain longer play episodes and they're able to sustain their play

themes. Moreover, those play themes develop over time as children develop plots, roles, characters and events. So complexity is really important to remember. Children also pay attention to means as well as ends. Play develops in social and symbolic complexity. They use different tools and resources to make one thing stand for something else. We also know from research that children enjoy exercising power, agency and control in their play. And this all contributes towards developing their friendships and identities. So by removing opportunities and time for play as children make the transition into primary school, we are actually removing the opportunity for them to continue learning in these complex and important ways.

If we go to slide 6 one of the ways in which we can think about progression is to think about the ways in which children make the transition from exploratory learning to creative and inventive learning. In exploratory learning children explore what does this object do. This means that younger children need time for open-ended exploration and discovery. And this can be alone, with peers or guided by adults. Children then progress to more inventive ways of thinking about everyday materials and resources and they ask themselves, *what can I do with this object?* This is where children still need time to transform and create new ideas, use materials and artefacts, tools and events in creative and imaginative ways. When children are in this phase of their play it leads to knowledge building. And again they can do this alone, with peers or guided by adults.

Let's go to slide 7 now and look at an example of this. I've chosen to show a slide of a child working at a computer or perhaps playing at a computer. In order to get to this level of mastery he has already been through some collaborative and responsive learning with an adult. The practitioner has used all different kinds of guided interactions – modelling, demonstrating skills, playing, talking, problem-setting and problem-solving, inventing with the child, engaging in shared thinking about how to use the computer as a tool, what the drawing programme can do and helping the child to understand what he can do with the programme. So there has been knowledge exchange between the practitioner and the child. This has led to the child's own knowledge building. The practitioner has provided positive reinforcement for his developing skills as a computer technologist and an artist, and he is enjoying the feelings of mastery and control. So this is an example of how adults and children work together to build progression in learning, and how children can then take their own skills into

new areas where they can use and apply them in many different ways.

**Arlene** **And in finishing our conversation Elizabeth, what advice would you give to a practitioner starting out to use play in the way you've described?**

**Elizabeth** I'd like to get practitioners to think about this idea of pedagogical repertoires. This means that there are many, many different ways in which we can support children's learning and development through play. We want children to become master players and master learners. So if we look at Slides 9, 10 and 11, I've summarised some of what we've been talking about and put some prompts in for practitioners to discuss and think about in their own provision.

First of all review and challenge your values and beliefs about adults' pedagogical roles and strategies. What do you think are the important ways in which you can work and play with children to support their learning and development without being overly intrusive in their play or trying to direct and control their activities all the time? We've talked about the importance of creating stimulating environments which provide opportunities for progression and challenge in play, both indoors and outdoors. We've also talked about the fundamental importance of skilled and sensitive observations to inform provision. Observe, reflect, discuss, reflect, decide and plan. These are all the ways in which you can ensure that your provision is responsive to all the children in your community.

Make sure you're planning for challenge and extensions. Children are sometimes very comfortable with doing the same things over and over again. But remember that you can encourage them to combine materials, and resources, and work and play with other children across different age groups.

We've talked about the importance of using guided participation in particular contexts. For example, adult and child involvement in a task or skill can be a very efficient way of moving a child on. And we've seen the example of the boy learning to use the computer and becoming a skilled technologist. I think it's also important that we occasionally use direct instruction. It is actually ok to teach a child to do something. That might include direct teaching of new skills. For example, we might teach a child how to use a new building kit, how to fit something together. Children may become de-motivated and very frustrated if they are left for too long to struggle with new equipment or new ideas.

I think it's very important to be a sensitive co-player. Make sure you respond to

the child's instructions. So for example, *you be the doctor; pretend I'm the pirate and I kidnap you*, means that you really do have to take on the role that the child assigns to you and perhaps to forget your teacherly role just for a few minutes.

At the same time it's important to recognise teachable moments to support children's skills as players and learners. You may note something while you are interacting with the child and you may choose to follow that up in a group time or a specific teaching session. We've talked about the importance of responding to child-initiated opportunities for learning. Remember that children are taking their own learning journeys and you want to be able to take those journeys with them so that you are there to respond in the teachable moments and to help to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding.

It's really important that we understand play from children's perspectives. Play really is about their meanings, intentions, interests, patterns of activity and friendships. We need to be respectful of those, and at the same time we do need to think about supporting, challenging and extending children's play. Remember to give praise for children's skills as master players and for the outcomes of their play. As children get older we become very focused on praising their neat handwriting or getting all their sums right but what about those inventive and creative moments? What about when a child helps another friend to play? So give praise for the children's skills. Remember to value their play because that gives the very powerful message that play really is important. And finally, I would say to practitioners, be confident in your knowledge and expertise. Be prepared to try things out and take some risks. And most importantly, remember to be a playful practitioner.

**Arlene**      **Elizabeth, thank you very much for joining me today to talk about play.**