

What is Play?

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Vignette

Home corner play observation

Sarah (4) is playing in the home corner at kindergarten. There are no other children in the home corner. Sarah opens the wardrobe and looks at a few clothes. She decides on a shawl and places it over her shoulders. She then closes the wardrobe and walks to the bed. There is a doll lying in the bed and Sarah carefully pulls the blankets up and touches the doll softly on the face. She then walks over to the sink. She puts in the plug and pretends to turn on the taps. She rolls up her sleeves and puts her hands in the sink. She then pretends to place items on the bench beside the sink.

At this time another child, Megan (4), approaches the home corner. Sarah raises her head to talk to Megan and then turns to look at the baby sleeping in the bed. 'I'm doing dishes while my baby sleeps', says Sarah. Megan walks over to the bed and reaches down to touch the baby. 'Don't touch her, she's sleeping', says Sarah, firmly but quietly, with her finger to her lips.

Megan stands up and walks over to the wardrobe. She pulls out a blue skirt and puts it on. She then walks over to the cabinet and pulls out two cups and saucers and gets a spoon from the drawer. Sarah is pulling the plug from the sink. 'Would you like a cup of tea?' asks Megan as she stirs the spoon in a cup. 'Yes, please', says Sarah. She walks to the bench where Megan is standing and picks up a cup and saucer. Sarah then walks to the table and places it down. She sits down and puts her feet on one of the other chairs. Megan follows her and sits down at the table. The two girls sit at the table for a minute and pretend to drink their tea.

Then Sarah stands up and walks to the bed. 'It's time for my baby to have her bottle', she says, as she picks up the doll and holds it in one hand while she straightens the blankets on the bed with the other hand. While she is doing this, Megan has found the doll's bottle. 'Can I give the milk to her?' Megan asks, holding the bottle in her hand. Sarah frowns and walks

over to the table where Megan is. 'No, she's my baby today and I want to give her the bottle. You were the mum yesterday', Sarah says, holding out her hand and waiting for Megan to give her the bottle. Megan hesitates as she holds the bottle close to her body. Sarah sits down on a chair and cradles the doll in her arms. She is still frowning as she looks up at Megan and says 'Give me the bottle. Can't you hear my baby crying?' (in a firm voice). Sarah holds out her hand again. Megan says, 'I want to give it to her. I want to be the mum, who else can I be?' 'Why don't you just be my friend and you can push my baby when we go for a walk to the shops soon?' replies Sarah. Megan thinks for a moment and then hands the bottle to Sarah.

Sarah puts the bottle to the doll's mouth and continues to cradle her like a baby. Megan walks over to the dress-up boxes and is looking for something else to wear. Sarah sits on the rocking chair and sings the doll a lullaby. Megan passes Sarah a hat and says, 'We'll need hats for our walk to the shops' and then asks, 'What do you need to get from the shops?' Sarah replies, 'We'll need some bread to make sandwiches for our picnic, and some juice. We need other things, so we'll need to make a shopping list'. 'A picnic, great', says Megan. 'I'll get the picnic blanket', she says as she goes looking for the picnic blanket.

Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- 1 provide a detailed description of play
- 2 identify the defining characteristics of play and recognise the difference between play and other activities according to these criteria
- 3 describe the categories of play and how each category contributes to development
- 4 discuss and describe the different types of play children may engage in
- 5 identify and discuss ways to support the different categories and types of play for young children.

Introduction

Play! Psychologists, play scholars and educators have been researching and theorising about play and its role in development for well over a century and, while there is a shared consensus that play has a positive effect on children's overall development and learning, play has proved to be extremely difficult to define. In this textbook we will explore play and its pivotal role within early childhood (EC). The text is structured in four parts—Part 1: Theories and Perspectives on Play; Part 2: Constructing a Play-Based Approach; Part 3: Curriculum, Policy and Planning for Play; and Part 4: Considerations for Educators. The purpose of the text is to enable you, as a pre-service educator, to develop a strong foundation on which to implement a play-based approach to the early years.

In this chapter we explore the key question 'What is play?' We embark on this task by first considering some of the definitions of play provided by key EC theorists and play scholars, before considering *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009), the national approved blueprint for teaching and learning in EC, and what it says about play. The focus of the chapter then moves to investigating the nine key characteristics of play, which help educators define it and distinguish it from other behaviours, and the categories of play, which further contribute to our understanding of play. While the characteristics help define what play is, this chapter also seeks to answer the questions 'How do children play?' and 'What does play look like?' These questions are answered by exploring and describing the various types of play that children engage in. With an understanding of the key characteristics of play, the categories of play and the different types of play children engage in, it becomes possible to understand the complexity and variety of play and the importance of play in the lives of young children.

What is play?

'Play' is a very broad term for a variety of activities and experiences that can be observed in humans of all ages, yet understandings of play and beliefs about play vary enormously. Play has long been valued in early childhood education and care (ECEC)—defined as contexts catering for children from birth to eight years of age—and the importance of play to young children's healthy development and learning is well documented and well researched. Play research covers a vast domain. Philosophers, theorists, psychologists and educators have been researching the topic of play and its value for centuries. But *what is play?* There is no simple definition of play and the borderlines around play, work and academic learning are not always clear and vary according to personal beliefs. Play can be viewed as the natural vehicle by which young children learn (Wood, 2007), yet may be pushed aside in favour of work or more formal academic learning (Kernan, 2007).

Over the years play has been interpreted as many things. Play has many definitions, characteristics, approaches, categories and types. It is probably easier to compile a list of play activities than it is to define play—no one definition of play can encompass all the views, perceptions, experiences and expectations that are connected with it (Kernan, 2007). Play may be somewhat difficult to define but, nevertheless, there appears to be broad agreement among theorists coming from multidisciplinary perspectives that play makes an important contribution to children’s development. Regardless of how the word is lived out in action, play has always been viewed as beneficial to the learning and development of the child. It is important that we look back at the ways that play has been viewed throughout history. Table 1.1 provides some definitions of play from key theorists and play scholars.

Reflect

What is your definition of play?

TABLE 1.1 Definitions of play

Theorist or play scholar	Definition
Froebel	‘Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child’s soul. Children have an innate ability to be curious and to investigate and to play to find things out’ (1887, p.55).
Huizinga	‘Play is a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious”, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner’ (1955, p.13).
Freud	‘Children repeat everything that has made a great impression on them in real life, and that in so doing, they recreate the strength of the impressions and make themselves masters of the situation’ (1961, p.11).
Montessori	Regarded play as ‘the child’s work’ (1967, p.180).
Bruner	‘Play ... a means for acquiring information about and experience with the environment’ (1972, p.699).
Erikson	‘The growing child’s play is the training ground for the experience of a leeway of imaginative choices within an existence governed and guided by roles and visions (1977, p.79).
Piaget	Described play as a ‘happy display of known actions’ (1962, p.93).
Vygotsky	‘Play is an adaptive mechanism promoting cognitive growth. It creates the zone of proximal development. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself’ (1978, p.102).
Rubin, Fein & Vandenberg	‘Play is a behavioural characteristic that occurs in describable and reproducible contexts and is manifest in a variety of observable behaviours’ (1983, p.698).

Theorist or play scholar	Definition
Lifter & Bloom	'Play is the expression of intentional states—the representations in consciousness constructed from what children know about and are learning from ongoing events—and consists of spontaneous, naturally occurring activities with objects that engage attention and interest' (1998, p.164).
Albon	'A free-ranging voluntary activity that occurs with certain time and place limits, according to accepted rules. Play is accompanied by feelings of tension and joy and an awareness that it differs from ordinary life' (2001, p.357).
Sutton-Smith	'Play is a pleasure for its own sake, but its genetic gift is perhaps the sense that life, temporarily at least, is worth living' (2008, p.122).
Uren & Stagnitti	'Play is a child's natural dominant learning approach and contributes to their knowledge and skill development across the cognitive, social/emotional, creative and physical domains, while also providing a solid foundation for future learning' (2009, cited in Jay, Hesterman & Knaus, 2014, p.3).
Smith	'Play is a spontaneous, voluntary, pleasurable and flexible activity involving a combination of body, object, symbol use and relationships. In contrast to games, play behaviour is more disorganised, and is typically done for its own sake (i.e., the process is more important than any goals or end points)' (2013, p.2).

(Adapted from Sluss, 2005, p.7)

As highlighted from these various definitions of play developed by key theorists and play scholars, there are many similarities in the ways that play has been perceived throughout history. Some of these similarities include: that children are curious and learn through investigating with their bodies, objects, symbols and environment; and that play is children's natural way of learning and acquiring information, and is not restricted to real-life situations. However, play is influenced by the social and cultural environment in which it occurs. Definitions and understandings of play within an educational context continue to evolve as research provides us with evidence-based information on what constitutes best practice in the early years.

In Australia, the EYLF is the national approved blueprint for teaching and learning in EC in all states and territories, and it highlights the importance of play. The EYLF is based on sound, evidence-based EC pedagogy and practice principles. It outlines play as both a context for learning and a pedagogical practice. The EYLF defines play as 'a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they actively engage with people, objects and representations' (DEEWR, 2009, p.6). The EYLF permits EC educators to promote play in social learning environments that give children the opportunity to explore, make choices and take initiative as competent and capable learners.

Reflect

Critically examine your own beliefs and understandings about play. What is your own personal view on the value of play in children's lives?

The EYLF provides broad direction for EC educators to facilitate children's learning (and this is explored more comprehensively in Chapter 7), but it is individual educators' beliefs about play that structure children's social environment. In homes and in ECEC settings, the attitudes and beliefs of adults directly affect the environment and experiences set up for children to engage with. An educator's personal views of play, and their knowledge about play, child development and learning, influence the quality of the play environments and experiences they provide for children, and ultimately affect how and what the children in their care learn. Educators need to critically examine their own beliefs and understandings concerning play and how these views may be different to the experiences of the children (Dockett & Fleeer, 1999). Educators who value play are more likely to provide a choice of learning experiences and to participate and engage with children during this time (Weldemariam, 2014).

Key characteristics of play

Play may be somewhat difficult to define but, according to Pellegrini (2011), many people recognise play when they see it. Even though there is no universal definition of play, researchers agree that there are a number of characteristics that comprehensively describe play and distinguish it from other behaviours. The basis for some of the most widely accepted characteristics of play is the work of Huizinga (1955) and this was further developed by Rubin, Fein and Vandenberg (1983). In essence, nine key characteristics of play have been identified by drawing on the research of: Bruce (2006); Dockett and Fleeer (1999); Gordon Biddle, Garcia-Nevarez, Roundtree Henderson and Valero-Kerrick (2014); Gray (2013); Hughes (1995); Kernan (2007); Rubin and colleagues (1983); Shaefer (1993); and Wood and Attfield (2005).

Reflect

As you read through the nine key characteristics of play, reflect on the observation at the beginning of the chapter. Which characteristics are evident in the Home corner play observation of Sarah and Megan's play?

An activity can be characterised as play to the degree that it contains the key characteristics listed here—play is an activity that is:

- 1 active—physically, mentally or both
- 2 meaningful
- 3 symbolic
- 4 voluntary or self-chosen
- 5 pleasurable
- 6 process oriented

- 7 intrinsically motivated
- 8 adventurous and risky; and
- 9 self-directed.

The following section of this chapter explores each of these characteristics of play in more detail.

Active

Play requires active mental, verbal or physical engagement with people, objects or ideas. Children are active agents in their environments. They explore and figure out how to communicate and respond to events and people around them (Gordon Biddle et al., 2014, p.273). Play may be physically active, using bodies for movement or active engagement with the physical environment. It may also involve mental activity, such as in dramatic play or play with words. Often both physical and mental activity are involved (Kernan, 2007, p.9).

Meaningful

Play makes sense to the player in that it relates to real and meaningful experiences for them, but the meaning may not always be clear to an observer (Dockett & Fleer, 1999, p.15). Children's play reflects what they have seen and heard, as well as what they know and can do. According to Kernan (2007, p.9), play also provides the context for building and extending children's knowledge, skills and understandings in a way that makes sense to them.

Symbolic

Play involves elements of make-believe, where people, objects and ideas may be treated as if they were something else. Children often pretend and imagine when they play. Within play, people and objects are used as symbols for other people and objects (Dockett & Fleer, 1999). Play enables children to: transform reality into symbolic representations of the world; experiment with the meanings and rules of serious life; and try out different ideas, feelings and relationships with people (Kernan, 2007, p.8).

Voluntary or self-chosen

Play is a freely chosen, personally directed behaviour. Children choose to play; they cannot be made to play. This involves doing what we want to do, as opposed to what we feel we have to do. According to Gray (2013), it's much more engaging to participate in activities that are interesting and relevant to our own needs and interests. Children construct the play and may change the direction of the play. The control of the play rests with the players: it belongs to

them (Kernan, 2007, p.9). This links closely with the earlier definitions of play provided by Albon (2001) and Smith (2013) (see Table 1.1).

Pleasurable

Play is a pleasurable experience in and of itself. Children engage in play because of the pleasure it affords. They derive pleasure when they draw on their own ideas, often shared with like-minded peers (Rubin et al., 1983). Children do not usually set out to engage in play with the aim of learning something or improving their skills in an area (Dockett & Fleer, 1999, p.15); they gain a deep sense of enjoyment from play. However, it should be noted that some scholars debate the inclusion of pleasure as a characteristic of play because some play is not pleasurable.

Process oriented

Play is enjoyed for the activity itself, not concerned with an end product (Wood & Attfield, 2005). Play is exploration without a care towards what the end result will be. Play can, however, have goals, but those goals are generally focused on the creation of something, instead of the end product itself (Gray, 2013). Feelings of being both capable and challenged are often associated with play, invoking the dominance of the means over the end; the process over the product; and the sustained concentration that is often apparent when children play (Kernan, 2007, p.9).

Intrinsically motivated

Closely related to engagement and pleasure is perhaps the most widely agreed-upon aspect of play—a child's intrinsic, or internal, motivation to play (Shaefer, 1993). Children play because they want to. Play is its own reward. It is an end in itself, done for the sheer satisfaction of doing it (Hughes, 2009). Different factors can motivate a child: being attracted by novelty; gaining a new angle on a familiar experience; achieving mastery with known objects; needing to work through feelings (Gray, 2013).

Adventurous and risky

Play helps children to explore the unknown. According to Bruner, play can be seen as the main opportunity for children to take risks without fear of failure (cited in Gordon Biddle et al., 2014, p.266). The 'pretend' element of play offers a safety net that encourages children to take risks. According to Kernan (2007, p.9), play can also be linked to the possibilities of exploring risk—doing something we have never done before or trying to do something we find difficult.

Self-directed

Play has structure to it—this structure is just created by the player to meet their needs and desires. Players choose not only whether to play or not to play but *how* to play, and that is the meaning of the statement that play is self-directed (Di Biase, 2015, p.46). The rules of play are established by children while they shape the play as they go, changing the characters, events, objects and locations, and directing their own actions during play.

These nine essential characteristics of play illustrate its complexity and variety, and contribute to a deeper understanding of play. Exploring each of these characteristics allows us to understand play's appeal for children and its significance for their well-being during the EC years. It also allows us to reflect on examples of children's play and use these criteria to answer the question 'Is it really play?' It is important at this point to note that a number of studies have established that play is also the preferred activity of children of all ages (Clark & Moss 2001; Corsaro, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2005; Kernan, 2007; O'Kane & Hayes, 2007; Sutton-Smith, 1997). When children are asked about their preferred activity, kindergarten, preschool and primary school children respond similarly in prioritising play—particularly free play (O'Kane & Hayes, 2007), free time (Corsaro, 2005), play with friends, play with open-ended materials (Einarsdottir, 2005) and the spontaneity and freedom of play outdoors (Clark & Moss 2001). When asked about their play activities, children talk about the importance of having fun, being with friends, choosing freely and being outdoors (Clark & Moss, 2001; Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Reflect

How can you support the different characteristics of play?

Categories of play

Mildred Parten (1933) was one of the early researchers studying children at play. She focused on the social interactions between children during play activities and the changing nature of children's play from the age of two to the age of five (Hughes, 1995). Parten identified six categories of play that increase in their level of social sophistication: 1) unoccupied play; 2) solitary play; 3) onlooker play; 4) parallel play; 5) associative play; and 6) cooperative play. The first three categories are considered to be non-play behaviour and the last three categories are indicators of social participation (Berk, 2002; Frost, 1992). Certain types of play are associated with, but not restricted to, specific age groups. However, it is important to remember that, although children may follow the overall sequence of social play categories as defined by Parten developmentally, factors such as the cultural or linguistic backgrounds of children and their families, learning environments, and social and economic status may influence how young children interact and

play in a certain context (Xu, 2010, p.492) (Chapter 10 discusses diversity considerations within a play-based approach). Children progress at their own pace and at different ages may engage in any of the different categories of play. Table 1.2 describes Parten's six categories of play and how each category contributes to development.

TABLE 1.2 Parten's six categories of play

Category of play	Description	Development
Unoccupied play	A baby or young child exploring materials around them without any sort of organisation—infants' play consists of using their senses to explore their environment. At first they rely on others to interact, pass toys etc. but mobile infants are able to explore a much wider, more varied play environment (Kearns, 2010, p. 227).	This type of play builds the foundation for the other five stages of play and begins almost as soon as movement becomes intentional, with babies playing with their own bodies. According to Rymanowicz (2015), this stage allows children to practise manipulating materials, mastering their self-control and learning about how the world works.
Solitary play	A child playing alone in their own world with limited or no interaction with other children—children engaged in solitary play can be absorbed in their own interactions with objects or toys and may seem unaware of other children or not acknowledge other children nearby. They pursue their own activity without reference to what others are doing (Frost, 1992). Solitary play begins in infancy and is also common in toddlers because of their limited social, cognitive and physical skills. However, children may engage in solitary play at any age.	Engaging in solitary play allows children to explore freely, master new personal skills and prepare themselves to play with others (Rymanowicz, 2015). Research suggests that children who have learnt to be comfortable in solitary play are also more likely to succeed in working independently (Gordon Biddle et al., 2014).
Onlooker/spectator play	A child observing another child or children at play but not becoming a player—according to Kearns (2010), onlooker behaviour is characterised by the child noticing other children playing and watching the play of others. The child often talks to the children being observed, asks questions or gives suggestions, but does not overtly enter into the play (Frost, 1992). This type of play usually starts during toddler years, but can take place at any age.	Children learn a lot by watching others—the social rules of play and relationships—and they explore different ways of playing or using materials and learn about the world in general (Rymanowicz, 2015). This stage allows the child to choose the activity and may easily move to another level as they become more comfortable.

Category of play	Description	Development
Parallel play	A child playing near or alongside other children playing but not playing or interacting with them—children playing parallel to each other sometimes use each other's toys and play at the same activity at the same time in the same space, but each child is still playing separately, always maintaining their independence (Hughes, 1995). Parallel play is usually associated with toddlers, although it happens in any age group.	This type of play is seen as a transition to more social types of play. However, in this type of play children are not really engaging in a social exchange. According to Gordon Biddle et al. (2014), this is an opportunity to work side by side on the same activity, practising skills and learning new methods to engage together. This play is typical of preschoolers and may serve as a precursor to group play.
Associative play	Children being involved in the same play, sharing materials and talking to each other, but not coordinating play objectives or having a common defined plan for the play (Fleer, 2013)—associative play usually occurs without any comment and with no attempt to play together in any meaningful way. The play of each child remains separate (Kearns, 2010). Children do not set rules and, although they all want to be playing with the same types of toys and may even trade toys, there is no formal organisation. Associative play begins during toddlerhood and extends through preschool age.	This type of play signifies a shift in the child. Instead of being more focused on the activity or object involved in play, children begin to be more interested in other players (Parten, 1933). Associative play allows children to begin practising what they have observed through onlooker and parallel play. They can start to use their newfound social skills to engage with other children or adults during an activity or exploration (Rymanowicz, 2015). This has strong links to the early definition of play provided by Freud (1961) (see Table 1.1) and sets the stage for cooperative play.
Cooperative play	As the name suggests, play categorised by the cooperative efforts between players—children engage in a play activity that has a shared goal and organise themselves into roles with the specific goal in mind (Frost, 1992). They engage in meaningful interactions and communications with others about their play. According to Kearns (2010), cooperative play involves the exchange of ideas and the sharing of materials. The play is extended by each child contributing ideas to the play and taking on assigned roles. Cooperative play begins in the late preschool period.	Cooperative play is a more sophisticated type of play because it requires the process of negotiation among two or more children (Gordon Biddle et al., 2014). It's important to remember that cooperation is an advanced skill and can be very difficult for young children and, ironically, cooperative play normally often involves a lot of conflict. According to Rymanowicz (2015), this is because it is sometimes difficult for young children to share, take turns and negotiate control in these types of play scenarios.

Modern scholars agree that Parten's categories of play have significantly contributed to our understanding of play and, while researchers continue to refine and redefine her categories, they are still widely used today. Parten's categories of play were originally named *stages of play* and were organised in a hierarchy that was described as paralleling development. These stages/categories of play have been challenged by contemporary researchers highlighting that Parten's study was limited in terms of the diversity of the participants and the target population. Development is not typical for all children and other influences such as cultural/linguistic, environmental, social and economic factors may have significant effects on their social play behaviour (Dyer & Moneta, 2006; Xu, 2010). It is important for EC educators to understand that there have been tremendous social changes in many aspects from Parten's era to current society that have undoubtedly influenced children's social play behaviour. For example, children today play differently, if not less, with one another than children almost 80 years ago because of technological inventions such as video games and the internet (Xu, 2010, p.495). Therefore, it is now more widely accepted that, as children develop, their play evolves and that certain types of play are associated with, but not restricted to, specific age groups.

Reflect

Look back at the Home corner play observation. Which categories of play are evident in the observation of Sarah and Megan's play?

Types of play

There are many different types of play and children can be involved in more than one type at any time. For example, children often pretend they are mothers (socio-dramatic play) when they are constructing sand cakes in the sandpit (constructive play). Play comes in different types and contexts, and it affects and is affected by each area of development: physical, cognitive, creative, social–emotional and linguistic (Pellegrini, 2011). Children need different types of play to fully develop the brain and body. Play with small items helps to improve fine control of small muscles, while whole-body play builds large muscles and bones. Building or creating something using natural or manufactured materials (construction play) provides an opportunity to practise cognitive skills and work on fine motor skills, hand–eye coordination and basic engineering skills. While children may show preferences for one type of play, it is important that they experience a variety of play types to support their learning and development. Drawing on the research of Burghardt (2011), Hughes (2002) and Miller and Almon (2009), Table 1.3 lists some of the different types of play and provides a description of each.

Investigate

Conduct an internet search for different types of play. Use Hughes (2002) and Miller and Almon (2009) as a starting point. Compare your results.

TABLE 1.3 Play types

Construction play —involves manipulating one or more elements of the play environment to construct something new or manipulating multiple objects and materials to explore how they go together. It includes building or creating something using natural or manufactured materials (e.g. building sandcastles in the sand).
Rough-and-tumble play —involves chasing, wrestling, spinning and playfighting. It is usually high energy, with children doing things like climbing over each other, wrestling and rolling around. This type of play is often mistaken for aggression or misbehaviour and therefore discouraged by adults.
Large-motor play —involves exploring movements and ways to combine movements: running, climbing, sliding, dancing, swinging, jumping, moving through an obstacle course and other types of movement.
Dramatic play —involves re-enacting everyday activities or situations that the child has observed. For example, a young child may gently rock a doll while feeding it a bottle. Dramatic play is sometimes referred to as pretend play or make-believe play.
Exploration play —involves using physical skills and sensations to learn about materials and their properties, what they feel like and what can be done with them. For example, a child may experiment with a tool to find out how it works with clay or dough. This type of play involves exploring something new or unfamiliar.
Role play —involves exploring ways of being, although not normally of an intense personal, social, domestic or interpersonal nature. For example, a child may sweep with a broom or drive a toy car during play (Hughes, 2002).
Language/communication play —involves playing with sounds, words, nuances and gestures. It includes unrehearsed and spontaneous manipulation of these, often with rhythmic and repetitive elements. It includes a child playing with rhymes, verses and songs they make up or change, mime/charades and also jokes (Miller & Almon, 2009).
Socio-dramatic play —involves enacting real and potential experiences of an intense personal, social, domestic or interpersonal nature (e.g. going to the shops) (Hughes, 2002). When it involves interaction and verbal communication with one or more play partners regarding the play event, it is termed socio-dramatic play. This is the combination of dramatic play and social play.
Social play —involves play during which the rules and criteria for social engagement and interaction can be revealed, explored and amended (Hughes, 2002). The play is structured, meaning there are rules to follow (e.g. games, making something together), and it may incorporate elements of pretence or imagination.
Small-motor play —involves developing, practising and refining small motor skills (e.g. stringing beads, playing with puzzles, sorting objects). This type of play enhances a child's physical dexterity and hand-eye coordination (Miller & Almon, 2009).
Symbolic play —involves using an object at hand and converting it into the toy or prop needed through a fluid process of fantasy or imagination (Miller & Almon, 2009, p.54). For example, a child may use a piece of wood to symbolise a person or an object (e.g. a stick to symbolise a sword).
Mastery play —involves purposeful play or enjoyment of an activity that facilitates the mastery of a specific skill. Children often repeat an action in play and persevere until they master it (e.g. playing on a balance beam to become a circus performer or riding a bike) (Hughes, 2002).
Recapitulative play —involves play that displays aspects of human evolutionary history, stored and passed on through our genes. It allows access to the behaviour of ancestors (e.g. living with the elements or building fires and shelters) (Hughes, 2002). It is often stimulated by aspects of the outdoor environment such as forests, pools, rivers and the weather.
Digital/technology play —involves using digital technologies and engaging in activities related to video and computer games, electronic toys and tablets, and the creation of digital content.

Play does not stay neatly encapsulated within these different compartments but, according to Miller and Almon (2009), knowing and watching for the broad types helps educators to understand how children play and what their play looks like. These types also help educators to consider whether they are providing adequate opportunity and materials for all of the types of play. For example, children may engage in construction play if educators provide materials such as large boxes, recycled materials and junk, large blocks, pieces of fabric, small tiles, lengths of ribbon, planks of wood, pieces of vinyl, sheets, milk crates, bales of hay, and lengths of bamboo or dowel. There are many resources, open-ended materials and toys that can be used for play, and arranging and resourcing quality indoor and outdoor play environments is essential (see Chapters 4 and 5). Many of the most useful play props are not expensive and can be found in the natural environment or recycled from homes and businesses. Play props, resources and materials should reflect a variety of backgrounds, cultures, abilities, genders and family structures. As children's safety is always a priority, it is important to also keep this in mind when choosing resources.

Reflect

Look back at the Home corner play observation. Which types of play are evident in the observation of Sarah's and Megan's play?

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of play by outlining some key definitions, characteristics, categories and types of play. While play has emerged as a difficult concept to define, the EYLF reminds us that play is the process by which children learn about their world and their place in it as they navigate different contexts, environments and situations (DEEWR, 2009). The definitions of play provided here emphasise the need for educators to view children as competent social learners who are capable of taking initiative, making choices and being the agents of their play. The research suggests that, while play may be somewhat difficult to define, there are certain characteristics that make it easy to recognise. The characteristics that help to describe play and distinguish it from other behaviours include play being: 1) active; 2) meaningful; 3) symbolic; 4) voluntary or self-chosen; 5) pleasurable; 6) process oriented; 7) intrinsically motivated; 8) adventurous and risky; and 9) self-directed. We have explored Parten's six categories of play, which contribute to our understanding of play by making us aware that children's play reflects their capabilities and that, as children develop, different categories and types of play emerge, allowing them to build a play repertoire. Finally, we have reviewed the different types of play that children engage in. This chapter has provided an overview of play and set the stage for the text as we develop an understanding of play-based approaches in EC. The following chapter will provide a foundation for understanding play in today's ECEC settings by exploring its history from classical to contemporary theories of play.

Chapter summary

- # Understandings of play and what counts as play vary enormously across different ECEC settings and are influenced by a range of factors, including educators' personal views and beliefs about play.
- # In Australia, the EYLF is the nationally approved blueprint for planning, teaching and assessing in ECEC settings, and outlines play as both a context for learning and a pedagogical practice.
- # Play has certain agreed-upon characteristics that help describe it and distinguish it from other behaviours.
- # Play is the preferred activity of children of all ages (it is fun, freely chosen and often outdoors, and includes friends and open-ended materials).
- # At all ages children's play reflects their capabilities and, as they develop, different categories and types of play emerge.
- # There are different categories and types of play that contribute to development and these often overlap in rich play scenarios.

Activities

- 1 What does play mean to you? What do you think of when you hear the word 'play'? What thoughts come to mind? Make a list of five words that describe play.
- 2 Close your eyes and think back to your own favourite childhood memories of play; as you were growing up, where did you play, what did you play, how did you play and why did you play? How many of the key characteristics of play were evident? What categories and types of play did you engage in?
- 3 Reflect on what you have learnt about play. Have your thoughts about the value of play changed?
- 4 Watch the video *Play-based learning and the Early Years Learning Framework with Lennie Barblett* at <www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqsplp/e-learning-videos/talking-about-practice/play-based-learning-beta>. Make note of the key elements of the EYLF (principles, practices and outcomes) mentioned by Barblett and how these support play-based learning in EC.
- 5 As an EC educator, you must be articulate about play and be able to defend play in your setting. How would you respond to a parent, principal or colleague who said, 'All the children do all day is play'? How would you explain the value of play?
- 6 Consider how each of the different types of play may be beneficial for children and important to their development.

- 7 There are many different types of play that children engage in and there are lots of toys, resources, materials, resources and equipment that can be used for play. Copy and complete the table below, outlining the types of play and listing the resources that you could provide for children of different ages (babies, toddlers and young children).

Type of play	Babies	Toddlers	Young children
Construction play			
Rough-and-tumble play			
Large-motor play			
Dramatic play			
Exploration play			
Role play			
Mastery play			
Language/ communication play			
Socio-dramatic play			
Social play			
Small-motor play			
Symbolic play			
Recapitulative play			
Digital play			

- 8 Further research
What do curriculum documents and frameworks have to say about 'play'?
- 9 Further research
Visit a childcare centre or school and observe a group of children there. Write down everything you observe. What categories and types of play are the children engaging in? What are the adults doing to support play in this environment?
- 10 Play advocacy
Find out about play advocacy groups in your state and local area. Are there EC educator groups? Are there parent groups? Who are the play advocates in your state and local area?

Recommended reading

Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (2009)

As mentioned in the chapter, in Australia the Early Years Learning Framework is the national approved blueprint for planning, teaching and assessing in ECEC settings. The EYLF is the first mandated framework to articulate a national approach to pedagogy within the early years. The aim of this document is to provide guidelines for EC educators in extending and enriching children's learning from birth to five years and through the transition to school. The EYLF has been developed with considerable input from the EC sector, EC academics and the Australian and state and territory governments. It is structured around the three themes of belonging, being and becoming. Through a series of principles, practices and learning outcomes, it sets out key ideas about the ways in which we should work with young children.

The EYLF can be located at: <https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/belonging_being_and_becoming_the_early_years_learning_framework_for_australia.pdf>.

National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program

The National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program (NQS PLP) site provided by Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is worth a visit as its aim is to support EC educators to further embed the EYLF in their daily practice as a key element in achieving the *National Quality Standard* (NQS). The NQS PLP site provides a wealth of information about play and numerous other relevant topics (indoor and outdoor play environments, planning and documentation, etc.) through: an online interactive forum; an online fortnightly e-newsletter; a series of online e-learning videos (the *Talking about practice* series); a series of short vignettes (the *Connecting with practice* series); a social media community on Facebook, Twitter and other online platforms; and free articles from ECA publications and other supporting resources.

The NQS PLP website is located at: <www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqsplp>.

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