

Play-based learning

Moderate impact for very low cost, based on very limited evidence.



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Play can be broadly defined as an enjoyable activity that is pursued for pleasure or its own sake. It can be contrasted with activities that have explicitly defined learning outcomes, or games, which are likely to have clearer rules or a competitive element. Play-based activities might be solitary or social, and involve a combination of cognitive and physical elements. Activities might be adult-guided, for example through the suggestion of a scenario for pretend play. In other cases, activities will be largely child-initiated (“free-play”), with adult involvement focused on the provision of props, or the management of the learning environment (see Physical environment).

Some examples of play-based learning may overlap with Self-regulation approaches or Social and emotional learning strategies. For children with social, emotional or behavioural problems, some play-based interventions have been developed. These programmes explicitly aim to improve social and cognitive skills by teaching children how to play.

How effective is it?

The evidence base for play-based learning is weak and diffuse, but does indicate a moderate positive relationship between play and early learning outcomes. On average, studies of play that include a quantitative component suggest that play-based learning approaches improve learning outcomes by approximately three additional months. However, there is substantial variation below this average and in relation to different learning outcomes, suggesting that additional, high-quality research is needed in this area.

Positive outcomes have been identified for a range of early learning outcomes including vocabulary, reasoning and early numeracy. Evidence related to early language and problem solving outcomes is more mixed. Play-based therapy can have substantial benefits for children who are identified as having social, emotional, or educational difficulties. There is no clear evidence whether play-based learning has a differential positive benefit on children from low-income families.

How secure is the evidence?

There is currently very limited evidence related to play-based learning in the early years. Though one systematic review and one meta-analysis have been conducted, the underpinning studies are relatively low quality, and frequently do not include quantitative impact measures. The majority of studies have been conducted in the United States, and the evidence base is relatively dated, including a number of studies from the 1990s.

Where studies have been conducted, for example, in a randomised controlled trial assessing the impact of the Tools of the Mind curriculum, play is often only one component of a broader programme, making it challenging to isolate its impact. It is important to recognise the methodological challenges of evaluating approaches that are part of multi-component interventions and that are, in many cases, unstructured by definition. However, more could be done than has been to date and this is an important area for further research.

What are the costs?

Most early years settings are equipped with indoor and outdoor play facilities, so the additional costs associated with play-based learning are likely to be very low. Specific additional resources and materials may be needed, such as for dramatic play, and training for staff in developing their understanding of how to develop children’s learning from play activities is likely to be beneficial. This includes training to support decisions about when not to intervene during child-initiated play.

What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. Have you considered how the learning environment affects play? How does the way you organise resources support active learning, play and exploration? For example, can children access resources independently?
2. How effectively does your environment encourage and support children to develop their language, literacy and mathematical understanding through play?
3. How does the balance between child-initiated play and more structured activities meet the learning needs of your children?
4. How confident are your staff in effectively supporting learning through child-initiated play?
5. How will you evaluate the impact of any new play-based approaches you introduce?