

The Research Behind Play-Based Learning SCRIPT

“Welcome to Session 1 of our **Learning Through Play** series.

Across the next six weeks, we are going to explore something that sits right at the heart of excellent Early Years practice: **play**.

Today, we are beginning with the research behind play-based learning.

Because although play is central to the EYFS, it can sometimes be misunderstood.

From the outside, a child building with blocks, pouring water, dressing up or repeatedly moving cars down a ramp can look as though they are simply keeping themselves busy.

But when we look more closely, there is often an enormous amount of learning taking place.

Children are solving problems.

Testing ideas.

Communicating.

Negotiating.

Taking risks.

Developing physical skills.

Using imagination.

Learning to manage frustration.

So today is about sharpening our professional lens.

Rather than simply asking, **‘What are the children playing?’**, we are going to start asking:

‘What learning is happening underneath the play?’”

Slide 2 – Safeguarding Do Now

“Let’s begin, as always, with our safeguarding scenario.

During role play, a child repeatedly acts out frightening scenes of domestic violence between two dolls.

What is the most appropriate response?

Take a moment to consider the options.

Do we stop the play because we feel uncomfortable with it?

Do we tell the child that this is not an appropriate game for Nursery?

Do we dismiss it because children often use their imagination?

Or do we observe carefully, avoid questioning the child during the play, record what we have seen and heard, and share our concern with the DSL?

This is a really important scenario for Early Years practitioners because children do not always communicate concerns through direct verbal disclosures.

Sometimes children communicate through behaviour.

Sometimes through drawings.

Sometimes through changes in presentation.

And sometimes through play.

One isolated piece of play does not automatically tell us what is happening in a child's life. But repeated, concerning themes should make us professionally curious.

Our responsibility is to **notice, record and report — not investigate.**"

Slide 3 – Safeguarding Do Now: Answer

"The appropriate response is **B**.

Observe carefully, avoid questioning the child during the play, record what you have seen and heard, and share your concerns with the Designated Safeguarding Lead.

What we do not want to do is turn the play into an investigation.

Questions such as:

'Does Daddy do that at home?'

or

'Who have you seen shouting like that?'

would be inappropriate because they are leading questions.

Instead, notice exactly what is happening.

What did the child say?

What did they make the dolls do?

Is this a repeated theme?

Record factual observations rather than interpretations.

For example, rather than writing, '*Child recreated domestic abuse they have witnessed at home,*' we record exactly what we observed and heard.

Then we pass that information to the DSL, who can consider it alongside everything else known about the child.

Play gives children a powerful means of expression. That makes careful observation both a pedagogical skill and, at times, a safeguarding one."

Slide 4 – Success Criteria

"By the end of today's session, we are aiming to understand three things.

Firstly, **why play is central to children's learning and development.**

Secondly, some of the research and EYFS thinking that underpin play-based learning.

And thirdly, the vital role adults play in extending learning through purposeful play.

That third point is particularly important.

A play-based curriculum does not mean adults simply provide resources and leave children to get on with it.

Nor does it mean adults constantly intervene and direct what children are doing.

High-quality play-based learning sits somewhere between those two extremes.

The practitioner observes.

Notices.

Listens.

Thinks.

And then makes a professional judgement:

Does this child need me right now — or is the most powerful thing I can do to stand back?

That judgement is one of the great skills of Early Years practice.”

Slide 5 – Our Journey

“Let’s look at where this series is going.

Today, we begin with **The Research Behind Play-Based Learning**.

Week 2 moves into **Planning Purposeful Provision**.

Week 3 looks at **Continuous Provision That Drives Learning**.

Week 4 explores **The Adult’s Role in Play**.

Week 5 focuses on **Challenge Without Worksheets**.

And finally, Week 6 asks us to **Evaluate Our Learning Environment**.

There is a deliberate progression here.

We begin with the ‘why’.

Then we move into the environment and provision.

Then we look more closely at what adults do within that provision.

And finally, we reflect on how we know whether our environment is actually achieving what we want it to achieve.

Throughout all six weeks, we are coming back to one central principle:

Play is not an alternative to learning in Early Years. Done well, play is one of the primary ways in which that learning happens.”

Slide 6 – Why This Matters

“Sometimes play is misunderstood.

We hear phrases such as:

‘They’re just playing.’

And the word *just* is doing a lot of work there.

Because during high-quality play, children may simultaneously be developing communication and language, thinking and problem solving, emotional regulation, social skills, physical development, literacy and mathematics.

Imagine children running a pretend café.

On the surface, they are pretending to make food.

But underneath that, they might be negotiating roles.

Writing an order.

Counting plates.

Remembering what somebody requested.

Using new vocabulary.

Taking turns.

Managing disagreement.

Using symbolic thinking — because a wooden block might suddenly represent a piece of cake.

The learning is integrated because children do not naturally divide their experiences into curriculum subjects.

That is why the final line on this slide matters:

Play is not the opposite of learning. Play is learning.”

Slide 7 – What Does the Research Say?

“Decades of research tell us that young children learn particularly effectively when they are actively engaged, emotionally involved, curious, exploring ideas, solving problems and interacting with others.

Think about those conditions for a moment.

They describe high-quality play beautifully.

During genuinely absorbing play, children are not passive recipients.

They are doing something.

They have a reason to persist.

They care about the outcome.

They make choices.

They test possibilities.

And frequently, they work alongside other people.

That is what makes play such a powerful vehicle for learning.

It creates many of the conditions in which young children are motivated to think.

And importantly, the EYFS places play centrally within children’s learning and development.

The presentation includes the quotation:

‘Play is not a luxury. It is a necessity for learning.’

That captures the central message here.

Play is not something children earn once the ‘real learning’ has finished.

It is part of the real learning.”

Slide 8 – What Learning Really Looks Like

“Imagine two children building a tower.

At first glance, the learning can look very simple.

They are stacking blocks.

But let’s slow the interaction down.

One child chooses a large block for the bottom.

Why?

Perhaps they are already thinking about stability.

Another block is placed on top.

The tower wobbles.

They stop.

They change something.

Now we have problem solving.

One child says:

‘Put that one there.’

Now we have communication.

The other disagrees.

Now we have negotiation.

They count how many blocks they have used.

There is mathematics.

The tower collapses.

They begin again.

There is perseverance.

They predict which block might work next.

They compare sizes.

They plan.

So within one seemingly simple episode of play, children may be planning, predicting, negotiating, counting, comparing, persevering, communicating and solving problems.

That is why observation is so important.

If we only see the finished tower, we miss most of the learning.”

Slide 9 – The Brain Loves Play

“When children play, their brains are busy making connections.

Play can help children build schemas, connect new learning to existing knowledge, develop imagination, strengthen memory and experience joy and motivation.

Think about repeated play.

A child might spend days transporting objects from one place to another.

Another may repeatedly enclose objects.

Another might continually build towers and knock them down.

To an adult, the repetition can sometimes seem unnecessary.

But children are testing ideas and building patterns of understanding.

They are asking, often without verbally articulating it:

‘What happens if I do this?’

‘Will it happen again?’

‘Does it work differently this time?’

And because play often has emotional meaning and personal relevance, children have a reason to remember it.

As the slide reminds us, children are far more likely to remember learning that has meaning and emotional connection.

Play provides both.”

Slide 10 – The Characteristics of Effective Learning

“The EYFS identifies three Characteristics of Effective Learning, and play provides an ideal context in which to see them.

Firstly, **Playing and Exploring**.

This is the child who effectively says:

‘I wonder...’

They investigate.

Explore.

Try something.

Take a risk.

Then we have **Active Learning**:

‘I’ll keep trying.’

This is where children concentrate, persevere and experience the satisfaction of achieving something they have worked towards.

And finally, **Creating and Thinking Critically**:

‘What if...?’

Children develop ideas, make links, change strategies and solve problems.

These characteristics remind us that learning is not simply about the outcome.

How the child approaches learning matters too.

A perfectly completed adult-directed task might tell us less about a child as a learner than watching them encounter a genuine problem in play, struggle with it, adapt their approach and eventually solve it themselves.

We are not only developing knowledge.

We are developing **learners**.”

Slide 11 – Play Doesn’t Mean ‘Hands Off’

“This is an important misconception to challenge.

Play-based learning does **not** mean leaving children to play without purpose.

High-quality practitioners observe carefully.

They notice interests.

They introduce rich vocabulary.

They ask thoughtful questions.

And they extend learning without taking over.

The phrase **‘without taking over’** is key.

Imagine a child building a ramp for a car.

An adult could immediately say:

‘Why don’t you put this block underneath it and make it higher?’

The problem is solved — but by the adult.

Instead, we might observe first.

Perhaps the child notices that the car is not moving very quickly.

Then we might say:

‘I wonder how you could make it travel faster?’

Now the thinking still belongs to the child.

Our role is not always to provide the solution.

Sometimes it is to create just enough curiosity or challenge for the child to find the solution themselves.

The adult’s skill lies in knowing when to step in — and when to step back.”

Slide 12 – Learning Through Play in Action

“Let’s look at this construction example.

Two children are building a bridge.

The child says:

‘It’s broken!’

The adult could fix it.

Or they could tell the child exactly what to do.

Instead, the adult says:

‘I wonder why it collapsed?’

The child replies:

‘It’s too wobbly.’

That tells us the child is already analysing the problem.

Then the adult asks:

‘What could make it stronger?’

And then something important happens.

The adult stops.

The children begin experimenting.

They choose wider blocks.

They test different ideas.

They discover what works.

Within minutes, they are exploring engineering, prediction, perseverance, mathematical language, teamwork and scientific thinking.

The slide finishes with a brilliant observation:

The blocks haven’t changed. The conversation has.

Sometimes extending provision does not require buying another resource.

It requires a skilful adult interaction.”

Slide 13 – Reflection Activity: Looking Beyond the Play

“For our reflection activity, we are going to practise looking beyond what children are physically doing.

Watch a short video of children engaged in free play, or observe children within your own setting.

Then ask four questions.

What learning is taking place?

Try to go beyond the obvious.

Secondly:

Which areas of learning are being developed?

You may find several areas happening simultaneously.

Thirdly:

Which Characteristics of Effective Learning can you see?

Are children exploring?

Persevering?

Testing ideas?

Making connections?

And finally:

How might an adult deepen this learning without interrupting it?

That last question is deliberately challenging.

Because sometimes the answer might be:

They shouldn't.

Sometimes the children are already deeply engaged and thinking hard.

Our intervention should have a purpose.

Share your observations afterwards.

You may be surprised by just how much learning becomes visible once you begin looking for it.”

Slide 14 – This Week’s Challenge

“This week, choose one period of child-initiated play each day.

And instead of asking yourself:

‘What are they making?’

change the question.

Ask:

‘What are they learning?’

‘What thinking is taking place?’

‘What vocabulary could I introduce?’

And perhaps most importantly:

‘Is this a moment to observe... or to interact?’

That final question is one I would encourage us to carry with us throughout this whole series.

Because adult interaction is not automatically better than adult observation.

Sometimes we add value by joining.

Sometimes we add value by questioning.

Sometimes by modelling language.

And sometimes we add the greatest value by doing absolutely nothing for a moment and giving children space to think.

Notice whether changing the questions you ask yourself changes what you notice about children’s play.”

Slide 15 – Spark Forward

“This week’s Spark Forward is therefore very simple:

Spend a little more time watching before you intervene.

Notice the conversations.

The perseverance.

The creativity.

The collaboration.

The thinking.

Try to resist the urge to immediately improve, fix or extend everything you see.

Instead, become curious about what the child is already doing.

Ask yourself:

What are they trying to understand?

What problem are they solving?

What learning might I miss if I interrupt too quickly?

You may discover that some of the most powerful learning happens when children believe they are ‘just playing’.

Next week, we will build on this by exploring **Planning Purposeful Provision** and how carefully designed environments can inspire curiosity, independence and deeper learning.

Because every block stacked, every role imagined and every question asked is building more than knowledge.

It is building a lifelong learner.”

Slide 16 – Research Links

“Today’s presentation draws attention to three useful sources: the Education Endowment Foundation’s **Preparing for Literacy Guidance Report**, the **EYFS Statutory Framework**, and **Birth to 5 Matters** from Early Education.

These links allow us to explore today’s ideas in greater depth.

But the key principle to take from today is that play-based learning is not about lowering expectations.

It is about understanding **how young children learn** and designing experiences that allow them to think, explore, communicate, practise and make connections.

The challenge for us as practitioners is to become increasingly skilled at recognising that learning while it is happening.

Because once we can see the learning within play, we become much better placed to decide what children need from us next.”

Slide 17 – Closing Reflection

“I’d like to finish with the thought on this final slide.

Children do not wake up hoping to complete a worksheet.

They wake up curious.

Ready to explore.

Ready to build.

Ready to imagine.

Ready to ask questions.

That curiosity is incredibly powerful.

Our role is not to extinguish it in the name of learning.

It is to harness it.

Play honours the way young children naturally explore their world.

So our responsibility is not to replace play **with** learning.

It is to become skilled enough to recognise the learning that is already happening within it — and then know how to deepen it when appropriate.

As you go back into your provision this week, watch a little longer.

Listen a little more carefully.

Look beneath what the children appear to be doing.

Because once we start looking beyond the play, we often discover extraordinary amounts of learning hiding in very ordinary moments.

In the Early Years, play isn't time away from learning. Very often, it is where the deepest learning begins."