

## **The power of play in education**

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The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2020) argues that play is a universal phenomenon and should be the 'central teaching practice' for all early childhood settings (p. 9). As with all mammals, play is a primal drive in the limbic system of our brains (Panksepp and Biven, 2012). It is an evolutionary survival trait (Kingston-Hughes, 2022), which neuroscientists have discovered positively impacts the prefrontal cortex of the brain, stimulating the growth of new neurons (Pellis and Pellis, 2010) and helping with higher learning. Dating back centuries, child-centred philosophers such as Piaget, Montessori, Reggio Emilia and Froebel suggest that play is essential to a child's development and children have a natural desire to explore and play. More recently, play has been shown to support children's development in an unprecedented number of areas, such as those linked to motor, cognitive, social and emotional skills (UNICEF, 2018). Research over the last few decades identifies how play supports development of children's language and communication (Chen et al., 2020), problem-solving (Ramani and Brownell, 2014), self-regulation (Savina, 2014), emotional understanding and wellbeing (Berk et al., 2006; Wieder, 2017) and theory of mind (Smith, 2005). Coplan and Arbeau (2009) explore the social aspect of play as being a fundamental context for supporting divergent thinking, cognitive flexibility and creativity. In contrast, children who do not engage in social play are more likely to demonstrate a variety of later difficulties: mental health and wellbeing issues, problems with peer relationships and poor academic outcomes (Rubin et al., 2009; Coplan et al., 2014, 2017).

Research goes beyond suggesting that play is key for all early childhood settings and explores how it is essential for older children too. Play is so fundamental to child development that it is specified in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as Article 31 (UN, 1989). We know that 'Play must be the right of every child. Not a privilege. After all, when regarded as a privilege, it is granted to some and denied to others, creating further inequalities.' (Souto-Manning, 2017, p. 785) Despite this, the practice that we see in classrooms beyond EYFS often does not consider the theories of play (Bryce-Clegg, 2017; Fisher, 2020; Quirk and Pettett, 2021). 'The stages of the intellectual development of the child' (Piaget, 1962), one of the most long-standing child development theories, emphasised the importance of giving opportunities for play as the child grows. For example, play with rules may start towards the end of the preoperational stage, around the ages of four to seven, but it is more common for children to develop this within the next stage, known as the concrete operational stage, which spans the ages of seven to 11 years (Nicolopoulou, 1993). We notice that Piaget (1962) does not suggest that play ends when children reach the

age of four or five; however, within our English education system, we often see opportunities for play-based learning disappearing as soon as children leave EYFS, if not sooner (Fisher, 2020; Quirk and Pettett, 2021; Sahlberg and Doyle, 2019).

An NFER study found that the majority of Key Stage 1 teachers felt that it was difficult to move from a play-based approach in the Foundation Stage to a more formal learning environment in Key Stage 1, as children found it difficult to sit down and listen (Sanders et al., 2005). In 2010, the Cambridge Review suggested that play should be extended beyond EYFS; however, the study, which included contributions from 1,052 organisations, ‘was frozen in the pre-election period... and was never taken up again’ (Fisher, 2020, p. 9). Instead, we find ourselves at a time where documentation, such as ‘Bold beginnings’ (Ofsted, 2017) or ‘Best start in life’ (Ofsted, 2022), is influencing decisions around having formal learning, not just from Year 1 but also within Reception, due to the interpretation of what being ‘school-ready’ means.

Bradbury (2019) argues that early childhood education in England has become increasingly ‘schoolified’, with the role of play being diminished within Reception. In the first EYFS curriculum (DCSF, 2008), ‘play’ was a central principle, underpinning both the delivery of the EYFS. By 2011, the Early Years National Strategies guidance recommended a balance of ‘child-initiated play, actively supported by adults’ and adult-guided ‘playful, rich experiential activities’ (DCSF, 2011, p. 5). By 2015, the Ofsted guidance ‘Teaching and play in the Early Years: A balancing act?’ still acknowledged the ‘fundamental value’ of play (p. 8). However, it described successful provision as having literacy and maths as a priority, and stated that taught sessions based on learning objectives should be included. Jarvis and Whitebread (2018) argues that Ofsted’s subsequent 2017 research on the Reception curriculum (Ofsted, 2017) signalled ‘a sudden and surprising shift in Ofsted's views’ . ‘Bold beginnings’ (Ofsted, 2017) states that reading is at the core of the Reception curriculum, and advocates heavily for adult-led learning through direct instruction. Since this, a range of literature has censured the increase in focus on formal learning and consequent devaluing of play (Kay, 2018; Jarvis and Whitebread, 2018; Alharbi and Alzahrani, 2020), with Richards (2018) describing the debate as ‘the battle for the soul of Reception’ (p.313.) Highly critical open letters from those working within the sector were also published, arguing that play should be central to an early childhood curriculum (TACTYC, 2017; Guardian, 2018). These thoughts are echoed by Bottrill (2022), who believes that play in the Early Years ‘is being squeezed from our children’s lives’, and Pascal et al. (2019), who advocate for the EYFS to fully recognise the value of a play-based approach. Jarvis (2018) conducted an analysis of a series of Ofsted reports and recommendations for Early Years policy and practice. She connected an ‘unevidenced attack’ (p.8) on play-based pedagogy with a problematic disregard for research findings about how children learn, such as the disappearance of sustained shared thinking (SST) from the Ofsted discourse.

Despite the United Kingdom having the youngest starting age for primary education (**Figure 1**), at least 12 countries who start primary education later than they do in the UK are reported to have higher educational outcomes when looking at the average combined PISA scores for maths, reading and science (OECD, 2023).

		Compulsory education		Primary education		Lower secondary education		Upper secondary education	
		Starting age	Ending age	Starting age	Ending age	Starting age	Ending age	Starting age	Ending age
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
OECD									
Australia		6	17	5	11	12	15	16	17
Austria		6	15	6	9	10	13	14	17
Belgium		6	18	6	11	12	13	14	17
Canada		6	16-18	6	11	12	14	15	17
Chile		6	18	6	11	12	13	14	17
Colombia		5	16	6	10	11	14	15	16
Costa Rica		4	16	6	11	12	14	15	16
Czech Republic		6	15	6	10	11	14	15	18
Denmark		6	16	6	12	13	15	16	18
Estonia		7	16	7	12	13	15	16	18
Finland		7	16	7	12	13	15	16	18
France	1, 2	3	16	6	10	11	14	15	17
Germany		6	18	6	9	10	15	16	18
Greece		5	14-15	6	11	12	14	15	17
Hungary		3	16	7	10	11	14	15	18
Iceland		6	16	6	12	13	15	16	19
Ireland		6	16	5	12	13	15	16	17
Israel		3	17	6	11	12	14	15	17
Italy		6	16	6	10	11	13	14	18
Japan		6	15	6	11	12	14	15	17
Korea		6	14	6	11	12	14	15	17
Latvia		5	16	7	12	13	15	16	18
Lithuania		7	16	7	10	11	16	17	18
Luxembourg		4	16	6	11	12	14	15	18
Mexico		3	17	6	11	12	14	15	17
Netherlands		5	18	6	11	12	14	15	17
New Zealand		5	16	5	10	11	14	15	17
Norway		6	16	6	12	13	15	16	18
Poland		6	16	7	12	13	15	16	18
Portugal		6	18	6	11	12	14	15	17
Slovak Republic		6	16	6	9	10	14	15	18
Slovenia		6	14	6	11	12	14	15	18
Spain		6	16	6	11	12	14	15	17
Sweden		6	15	7	12	13	15	16	18
Switzerland		4-5	15	7	12	13	15	16	19
Turkey		5-6	17	6	9	10	13	14	17
United Kingdom		4-5	16	4-5	10	11	13	14	17
United States		4-6	17	6	11	12	14	15	17

**Figure 1:** Starting and ending age of students in compulsory education and by level of education in 2019; the age refers to the age of the students at the beginning of the school year (OECD, 2021)

In the current post-pandemic educational landscape, we have seen an increase in the needs of children in school, both academically and socially (Alwani et al., 2024). We also need to consider how many countries across the world – not least the other three countries within the UK, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales – advocate for play. Northern Ireland’s revised curriculum ensures that the Foundation Stage continues until the age of six, and then in Key Stage 1 similar principles are applied to those in the Foundation Stage. It states that children should ‘have opportunities to be actively involved in practical, challenging play-based learning in a stimulating environment, which takes account of their developmental stage/needs (including those with learning difficulties and the most able children) and their own interests/experiences’ (CCEA, 2019, p. 9).

In 2010, Wales became the first country in the world to pass a law about opportunities for children’s play (Play Wales, 2024). Following this, they produced a document entitled ‘Wales – a play friendly country’ (Welsh Government, 2014) and have since developed a curriculum to align (Hwb, 2020). The curriculum gives teachers freedom to teach children aged three to 16 in a way that supports all their learners. Their government advises that, as part of their school day, children have a right to be given time and space to play.

In Scotland, The 'early years' are seen to span pre-birth to the age of eight, and the Scottish Government and local partners state that they will continue to promote play-based learning, including in early primary. They also suggest that 'there is no long-term advantage to children when there is an over-emphasis on systematic teaching before 6 or 7 years of age' (Scottish Executive, 2007, p. 6).

From the other countries, we recognise that decision-makers are giving value to play and creating an integrated, balanced approach throughout primary school. The benefit of starting formal education earlier suggests that there can be a short-term gain but it has long-term negative consequences on mental health and achievements (Phillips and Stipek, 1993). Despite the 'school-readiness' agenda, some schools are showing how play can be embedded throughout EYFS and all the way through primary (Ward, 2019). We also need to consider that the Ofsted quality of education handbook for EYFS states: 'Teaching is a broad term that covers the many different ways in which adults help young children learn.' (Ofsted, 2024a, para 186) In addition, the statutory EYFS framework states that it 'does not prescribe a particular teaching approach' and 'Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, relate to others, set their own goals, and solve problems. Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play and learning that is guided by adults.' (DfE, 2023, p. 17) Likewise, the National Curriculum states that it 'provides an outline of core knowledge around which teachers can develop exciting and stimulating lessons to promote the development of pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills as part of the wider school curriculum' (DfE, 2014, para 3.2), but nowhere does it explicitly state how this should be taught. With this in mind – and knowing that, as a profession, we are becoming more heavily focused on evidence-based practice (Collin and Smith, 2021) – we cannot ignore the wealth of scientific research on the benefits of play for all learners (Kingston-Hughes, 2022; Goswami, 2010; Nicolopoulou, 1993).

The number of children with special educational needs shown within our education system is increasing (Strogilos and Ward, 2024), and Sir Martyn Oliver has stated that Ofsted 'expect to see [schools] promoting inclusion, and bringing down barriers... We want to see you getting it right for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. Because when you get it right for them, you get it right for everyone.' (Ofsted, 2024b) As research indicates that play can be more effective than many traditional interventions in terms of supporting children with additional needs, especially within the Early Years (Macintyre, 2010; Atkinson et al., 2017; Murphy, 2022), there is a strong rationale to ensure that play is given the priority that it deserves in the lives of all of our children.

In terms of the future, not only does play support the economy, from the point of view of developing a range of skills that children will need throughout their lives (Fisher, 2020), but it also ensures that the children, in the here and now, are happy (Kingston-Hughes, 2022). By providing play in school, and ensuring that others are educated about the importance of play, we can put children's needs first and, at the same time, protect the future and change the world!

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