



WHAT DO WE REALLY MEAN BY PLAY?

Understanding Play Through Theory, Practice and Evidence

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Her first MA is in Integrated Practice from Leicester University and her second in Psychoanalytical Observational Studies from the Tavistock and Portman Centre. She has just started a research doctorate to consider what happens within the early years supervision process.

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WHY DOES PLAY MATTER SO MUCH IN EARLY YEARS PRACTICE?

If you ask ten Early Years practitioners what “play” means, you’ll get ten different answers. Children play games, footballers play matches, musicians play instruments. In our settings we talk about water play, pretend play, rough-and-tumble play, guided play, digital play... and child psychotherapists speak of therapeutic play.

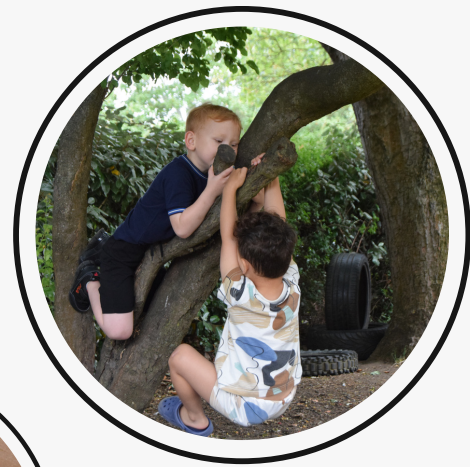
Yet despite how familiar the word feels, the concept is far from simple. As I revisited the literature for a review, I realised that play is profoundly complex — relational, symbolic, cultural, and even neurological. And at the same time, it is central to the everyday practice of Early Years educators.

This blog explores what play is, why it matters, and how we can use theory and evidence — including insights aligned with the EEF’s Early Years guidance — to strengthen the conditions in which play can flourish.

PLAY BEGINS WITH RELATIONSHIP

Some researchers suggest that play begins even before birth. Bustato (2014) describes early “dialogues” between mother and foetus as proto-play. Reddy (2008) observed that by twelve weeks, babies show teasing, delight, and playful exchanges with caregivers. Play, then, is not an activity but a relationship — a quality of interaction built on attention and attunement.

Stern (1985) reminds us that play emerges only when we feel safe enough to explore. Schore’s (1994) research into brain organisation supports this: emotional safety and co-regulation shape the early neural pathways that underpin curiosity, flexibility, and imagination. These insights connect strongly with the EEF’s emphasis on emotionally secure, high-quality adult–child interactions as a foundation for learning.



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PLAY AS A CULTURAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL FORCE

Historically, theorists such as Baldwin (1906) and Turner (1982) saw play as central to culture itself — a serious business through which children understand the world. More recently, Music (2017) notes that animals deprived of play show significant disadvantage. Gopnik (2016) adds that play emerges only when basic needs are met: it is essential, but also fragile.

From an EEF perspective, this mirrors strands within the Early Years Toolkit where high-quality interactions and emotionally enabling environments disproportionately benefit children at risk of disadvantage. When play thrives, children regulate emotions more effectively (Berk et al., 2013), develop self-regulation capacities (Panksepp, 2003; 2011), and build the flexible thinking needed for later learning.

PLAY AS SYMBOL, STORY, AND MEANING-MAKING

For Klein (1926), children's play is never just play. It symbolically expresses internal worlds — wishes, anxieties, conflicts, hopes. Winnicott (1971) saw play as the birthplace of creativity, where children experiment with the gap between inner experience and outer reality. Segal (1957) described symbol-making as a lifelong process that helps us integrate past and present, self and other.

Freud's famous observation of his grandson's cotton reel game is a powerful example: the child rehearses the pain of absence and the joy of return. Alvarez (1992) later argued that some children use play not only to work through loss but to create experiences of hope and safety when they have been missing.

These ideas matter for practice because they offer a lens for interpreting play: not simply as activity, but as communication. Bustato (2014) describes play as a child telling the story of their internal relationships. Through this lens, practitioners can attune to the emotional meaning within children's play episodes — especially when behaviour appears puzzling or repetitive.



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WHEN PLAY BECOMES DIFFICULT

Repacholi et al. (2014) found that children under stress struggle to play; their cognitive and emotional load is simply too great. Charles (2019) argues that stress, deprivation, and trauma do not only inhibit play — they fundamentally limit the ability to learn.

This aligns strongly with the EEF's focus on disadvantage and the importance of early support. If play is impaired, this is not a behavioural issue but a signal of the child's internal state. Warmth, co-regulation, sensory safety, and attuned adult presence often need to come before any expectation of playful engagement.

BRINGING EVIDENCE AND PRACTICE TOGETHER: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR EARLY YEARS EDUCATORS?

1. Prioritise emotional safety as the foundation for play

Children cannot enter a playful state when dysregulated. Predictable routines, sensitive transitions, and attuned adult responses create the neurobiological safety (Schorer, 1994; Stern, 1985) that makes exploration possible. This is especially important for children experiencing disadvantage.

2. See play as communication, not simply behaviour

Using Klein, Winnicott, and Segal's insights, practitioners can observe play for symbolic meaning. Repeated themes, characters, or actions may reveal emotions children cannot yet express verbally.

3. Use high-quality interactions to extend and enrich play

EEF evidence emphasises the impact of adult-child interaction on language and learning. In play, adults can:

- offer commentary,
- join sensitively without dominating,
- model language,
- scaffold imaginative possibilities, and
- engage in sustained shared thinking.

These strategies amplify the developmental power of play without directing it.

4. Support stressed or dysregulated children through co-regulation first

Some children cannot access play until their nervous systems settle. Slow pacing, sensory comfort, and proximity support can help children return to readiness. For practitioners, this may mean holding space quietly, rather than initiating play.

5. Observe play with curiosity and without judgement

If we approach play as symbolic storytelling, our role becomes one of listening. What might this play sequence be expressing? What need is being communicated? How can we respond in ways that support agency, confidence, and connection?

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Play is a relational, symbolic, emotional, and developmental process — not a single behaviour.

Emotional safety and co-regulation are prerequisites for meaningful play.

Play offers powerful insights into children's internal worlds.

High-quality interactions can significantly enhance play and support learning, especially for children facing disadvantage.

Difficulties in play often signal stress, not disinterest — and practitioners can respond with sensitivity, safety, and curiosity.

CALL TO ACTION

This week, take ten minutes to observe a child's play through a new lens. Rather than asking "What are they doing?" try asking:

"What might this play be communicating — and how can I join it in a way that strengthens connection, curiosity, and emotional safety?"

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- Berk, L.E., Mann, T.D. and Ogan, A.T. (2013). 'Make-believe play: Wellspring for development of self-regulation', *Society for Research in Child Development*, 27(2), pp. 74–83.
- Fonagy, P. and Target, M. (1996). 'Playing with reality: I. Theory of mind and the normal development of psychic reality', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 77, pp. 217–233.
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- Turner, V. (1982). *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Publications.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1971). *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock.

EEF MATERIALS REFERENCED

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (2024). *A School's Guide to Implementation: Guidance Report*. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/implementation>

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (2025). *Early Years Toolkit*. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/early-years-toolkit>

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (2025). *Early Years Evidence Store*. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/early-years-evidence-store>

FURTHER READING

These are optional readings that align with the blog's themes of play, emotional safety, relational pedagogy, and evidence-informed practice.

PLAY, CHILD DEVELOPMENT, AND RELATIONAL THEORIES

- Trevarthen, C. (2011). *Communicative Musicality: Exploring the Basis of Human Companionship*.
- Lillard, A. (2017). *Play and Development*.
- Golinkoff, R. & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2016). *Becoming Brilliant: What Science Tells Us About Raising Successful Children*.

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TRAUMA, REGULATION, AND THE CONDITIONS FOR PLAY

Perry, B. & Szalavitz, M. (2006). The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog.

Siegel, D. & Bryson, T. (2011). The Whole-Brain Child.

EEF-ALIGNED PRACTICE RESOURCES

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). Improving Social and Emotional Learning in Primary Schools — while focused on older children, principles of co-regulation and emotional safety transfer meaningfully to Early Years.

Stronger Practice Hubs blogs (e.g., self-regulation, parental engagement, high-quality interactions).

EARLY YEARS PEDAGOGY AND OBSERVATION

Trevarthen, C. & Delafield-Butt, J. (2013). 'The infant's cooperative awareness of human agency'.

Manning-Morton, J. and Thorp, M. (2015). Two-Year-Olds in Early Years Settings: Journeys of Discovery.



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🌐 <https://www.pengreen.org/stronger-practice-hub/>

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