Children at play –
brain building in progress.

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The science behind playing.

- It is the very nature of play that is building and shaping the brain throughout the early years (birth – 7 years).
- Early Years theorists have always told us, and now neuroscience confirms, that sensory stimulation builds the nerve networks that create the architecture of the brain.

So, what is play?

- Play is freely chosen by, and under the control of, the child.
- The child decides how to play, how long to sustain the play, what the play is about, and who to play with.
- There are many forms of play, but it is usually highly creative, open-ended and imaginative. It requires active engagement of the players, and can be deeply satisfying.

Children must have the opportunity to:

- Play on their own or with others both indoors and outdoors without being directed by an adult.
- Play with a range of open-ended resources imaginatively and create their own ‘stories’/play themes talk and develop conversations as they play.

Highly structured approach

At the other end of the continuum is a view of play which is highly structured. As we have seen from the explanation of the terminology above, this cannot be considered play.

It is adult directed and takes on a much more controlled and overtly structured approach to children's learning and development.

- An approach like this has few or no opportunities for children to use their own initiative or express their own ideas or thoughts.
- A highly structured approach does not foster the self-regulation or growth mind-sets that we know are required for children to become motivated, independent and innovative thinkers and learners for the present and the future.

Interestingly, this type of approach will give the appearance of raised levels of progress as children are in effect ‘hot housed’ to reach adult set goals and targets.

Children will in most cases remember and repeat what they are taught but have very little understanding or mastery over the concepts embedded within it.

They will have a surface level of understanding but will not be truly confident or competent when they come across the learning again or when they want to make connections to other aspects of their learning.

In some cases we can see how this type of learning has led to children having a dislike of reading and writing and learning in general, and worryingly high levels of stress (Repley, 2002).

Taken from National Strategies, Good Practice in EYFS 2009.

Child initiated activities?

Independent learning is about children having opportunities and time to plan and develop their play and interests.

Within child initiated time children are able to extend and apply their learning. They are encouraged to explore, take risks, make decisions, solve problems and share their achievements with others.

Children apply the knowledge and skills they gain from other areas of learning in a context, which is meaningful to them.

They consolidate and internalise, thus forming a deeper understanding.

Asking children to plan and review what they do involves them purposefully in their own learning.

This is a very motivating experience and allows children to become engrossed; developing skills of concentration and perseverance.

Children think about, plan and review their time, making decisions and experiencing personal success, which helps to develop their confidence, self-esteem and independence.

It values creativity and individuality, and provides time for child initiated collaborative work.

Independent planning time gives children ownership of their learning, providing many opportunities to celebrate everyone's interests and achievements, promoting a culture of success in school.

Child initiated learning not only provides opportunities to apply learning from other curriculum areas, but also helps children to develop the essential skills of; concentration, perseverance, resilience, critical thinking, problem solving and the ability to work collaboratively, which can be applied to all the learning that takes place in school, at home and in all aspects of life.

What the experts say:

"It is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them." –

Leo Buscaglia.

"It is becoming increasingly clear through research on the brain as well as in other areas of study, **that childhood needs play.**

Play acts as a forward feed mechanism into courageous, creative, rigorous thinking in adulthood." –

Tina Bruce.

“You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.” - Plato, Greek Philosopher.

“for knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world.” –

Albert Einstein talking about children engaging in role play.

- As a school we recognise the importance and value of good quality playing and do the majority of our teaching through child initiated activities.
- It is through the interactions of the adults with individuals or groups of children that enables a child to develop and move forward in their learning. The adult must know when to step in and guide or when to step away and observe. Misreading the cues and interfering too soon or too slowly can stunt a child's play and stall the learning.
- Allowing children to flit from one activity to another, or constantly repeating the same activity, displays low level play and therefore little learning opportunities.