



Philosophy Series - Play Based Learning

“All they do is play”

Sadly, this is a quote we know all too well. Over the years, we have heard this comment made by many families, friends, peers and people in the community. So, we have dedicated part 1 of our *Philosophy Series* to the importance of play.

Play is often described as children's 'work'. They learn most effectively when they are relaxed and having fun. Children's learning becomes meaningful when they are free to learn at their own rate, in their own way, with a program that is relevant to their lives.

Play enables development, and as children develop so does their play. Child-directed, play-based programs assist children in gaining a range of social, cognitive, emotional, lingual & physical skills. Play helps children grow emotionally as it is joyful and provides an outlet for anxiety and stress. It also encourages creativity.

Have a look at the photos on this page. To the left is a 3 year old Pre-School child, building a tall tower out of cardboard tubes. To the right is a 2 year old Pre-Kinder room child, building a smaller tower out of soft foam blocks.

To the untrained eye, it probably looks like two children building with toys and materials. However, they are both learning important maths concepts - size, shape, width, height, balance etc. They are also working on hand/eye coordination, strengthening their physical skills, exploring challenges, as well as a

number of many other skills.

You can see that our 2 year old friend is building a tower that is comfortable to his size. However, our 3 year old friend has been engaging in this kind of play for many years and now feels confident enough to build one taller than himself!

Long periods of uninterrupted play are crucial for moments like this as they build children's concentration and the inner motivation to take responsibility for their own learning. A positive sense of self is the most powerful tool for all learning.

Next time you are visiting the centre, have a look around you. Hopefully you will see beautiful learning happening right in front of your eyes, that you may have never noticed before.



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What is an Indoor-Outdoor Program?

I'm sure you have heard about our indoor-outdoor program, but do you know what it actually means?

An indoor/outdoor program is exactly that - a program where children have access to both indoor and outdoor environments at all times.

For many years, we had a very structured daily routine, where time was dedicated daily to "going outside". But, after a lot of research & training, we learnt the importance of continuous access to the outdoors for children.

So, we adopted this program in early-2015 and couldn't have imagined how many benefits have come along with it, such as:

- Each space is quieter and calmer as children have the option to play where they feel most content. Children wishing to retreat to a quiet space can do so comfortably, like our 2 year old Pre-Kinder friend in the above-right photo.



- We have seen a decline in boisterous behaviour as children are more spread out and can move into a different environment if they feel overwhelmed.
- There are less boundaries for children so they are generally a lot happier. We used to feel like we continuously told them that they needed to wait or that they were unable to go in a certain area due to time, but now there's no need for this.
- Children are able to spend longer amounts of time at experiences uninterrupted by others needing a turn.
- There are many opportunities to be more active, both indoors and outdoors, as there is a lot more space available. An overcrowded environment would make it near impossible for our two kinder children in the bottom-left photo to engage in this type of activity.
- One of the biggest concerns for families is illness. We have seen a major decline in the rate of infection since the implementation of this program. Any place where a lot of children are kept in close proximity can be a breeding ground for germs. Our indoor/outdoor program disperses the groups between two spaces, so there is less opportunity for germs to spread. Also, the continuous access to fresh air is very important for children's health.
- Due to the spaces being so much calmer, children are feeling more secure and staff



are feeling less stressed. A relaxed team projects a positive energy onto the group which in turn makes the children feel happy and safe.

- Continual access to an outdoor space allows children the opportunity to regularly engage with the natural environment whenever their heart desires. This includes jumping in puddles, digging in the mud, dancing in the rain, climbing trees, drawing in the sand with sticks etc.
- Lastly, we have found that children transition into care a lot easier when they can move straight into the outdoor space. It has eased the separation anxiety of many children as most of them prefer playing outdoors over staying inside. They are excited to go and run around the yard, visit the chickens, or ride a bike. They can also stand at our front fence and wave to their family as they depart.

The Wonders of Loose Parts



You may have noticed that the children play with very random materials while at our centre. These items are called “*loose parts*” which is a term to describe open-ended materials. They do not come with a set of directions or an implied “right way to use them”. Some may consider loose parts “*junk*”, but these items are very beneficial to children’s development.

Loose parts are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways. They can be used alone or combined with other materials.

There isn't enough space to write about all of the benefits of loose parts. But, some examples are:

- They encourage creativity, imagination and curiosity.
- They are very inexpensive - many items are free.

- Loose parts can be used in many different ways and can be adapted and redesigned.
- They can be used by all children regardless of age or development.
- Children can engage with loose parts alone, with a small group, or within a large group. They encourage cooperation & enhance social skills.
- Loose parts allow children to build, dismantle, bang together, repurpose & more, to make their ideas come to life.
- They are proven to develop more skill and competence than most modern plastic toys.
- Lastly, they are open-ended so every child that engages with them can create a completely different experience for themselves.

As you can see in the photos, there are many different things available that are considered “loose parts”. These materials can be natural, manufactured or recycled. Some examples of loose parts are:

Recycled/Manufactured

- Tyres
- Pallets
- Ropes
- Cable Reels
- Boxes
- Cardboard Tubes
- Pegs
- Containers
- Scarves & Ribbons

- PVC Pipes
- Caps and Lids
- Milk Crates

Natural

- Pinecones
- Shells
- Rocks
- Logs
- Wood
- Seedpods
- Pebbles
- Sticks

As children get older and more comfortable with loose parts, they usually start engaging in risky play. Risk taking teaches children what they are capable of and what they can achieve.

We provide many opportunities for children to challenge themselves using loose parts while attending. We will go into this area in further detail in an upcoming chapter.



Glorious, Messy Play!

We have come across a lot of families (and educators!) over the years that get very stressed over the sight of mess! But, messy play is so important for children and we aim to include it every single day.

If a child covered from head to toe in paint or mud makes you squirm, just remember that we will always clean them up before they go home. If you make sure you send along clothes that can get dirty, then everything will be a-ok!

While engaging in messy play, children learn about cause & effect, colour, texture and shape, and explore many mathematical concepts while practicing pouring, mixing and squeezing. There are also many opportunities to strengthen language during discussions about the activity.

Messy play is a complete sensory experience so children are developing all five of their senses as they look, smell, feel, hear and

One thing you must know is that messy play isn't always just paint and mud! We have been known to provide opportunities to get messy indoors and out with a multitude of materials - clay, goop, slime, dirt, cornflour, shaving cream - you name it, we've most likely tried it!

Plus, one of the most satisfying messy experiences for children is one that doesn't even cost a thing - rain! Wet days provide us with so many opportunities for learning



Research has shown that more than a third of families never engage their children in messy play, even though it is such a loved experience.

Messy play gives children the opportunity to work on many different skills, and they are able to explore the provided art medium any way they choose. It contributes enormously to the development of a child's cognitive and creative abilities.



yes, sometimes taste! We provide the children with non-toxic, messy materials for this very reason.

Messy play is open-ended so children can engage with the experience any way they please. You will see in the photo on the left that one of our pre-school friends is using a straw to blow bubbles. His friend next to him is exploring the exact same medium but in a completely different way.



and children feel so much joy when dancing in the rain. There is nothing like the happiness you feel when jumping in big puddles!

There's a preconceived notion that children who are "dirty" or "messy" after attending an early childhood service have not been adequately supervised. We can assure you that we're right there, encouraging them to get as messy as they can. Messy clothes are a sign of a really great day at child care!

Process-Based Art vs. End-Product Art



At our service, we focus on the art process and not the end product. For example, if a child is painting a picture at the easel, we focus on the skills they are developing while engaging in this activity, rather than focusing on what it will look like at the end.

End-product art experiences usually have a pre-planned outcome that children can find frustrating to achieve. Whereas process-based art experiences allow children to be creative and utilise art materials for their own individual expression.

No two pieces will ever look the same as each child will explore the materials in their own way. There are no instructions and no “right” or “wrong” way to engage with the activity.

Art that has been planned with an end-result in mind is very obvious. The children will have followed instructions, the artwork will look very similar, and sometimes there will have been templates used. Sadly, on occasions, children’s art will be changed or “fixed” to ensure it looks like the outcome

that was set. A perfect example is a template of a Christmas tree. If it has a star sitting perfectly on top, perfectly positioned baubles and tinsel, and is inside the template lines, 9 times out of 10 it was altered in some way, or the child was instructed on how to complete the activity.

One important quote that has always stuck with me is to remember that *“it is the children’s art work, and not mine”*. Therefore, it is not up to me as an educator, or any other early childhood



educator, to impose my own ideas onto a child. We believe that children are confident and capable learners with their own ideas, so allowing them the opportunity to express themselves creatively, is very important.

As you can see in the 3 photos attached, all of our pre-schoolers are exploring art materials in their own way. Their beautiful works of art are completely their own ideas and they are free to explore the different art mediums at their own pace, in their own way. This is the same for all age groups.

One thing we always make sure is that participation in art activities is never forced upon children. If a child is not interested in an art experience, we will focus on what they are interested in. As mentioned earlier, children learn better when they are engaged, and they will never be more engaged than they are with something they enjoy playing with.

Just like sensory play and messy play experiences, art experiences provide children with many opportunities to learn about colour, texture, smell, shape, and an array of other skills important for development.

If a child is using scissors, it doesn’t matter if they are not cutting perfectly along the lines. They are developing their fine motor skills and learning about hand/eye coordination. It may take them months, or even years, to master that skill, but they are practicing in their own way, in their own time.

So, next time your child shows you a piece of their artwork, you can be assured it is exclusively theirs.



The Big Transition to School

Did you know that our play based philosophy flows through all the way into our 4-year-old kinder program? A lot of research has been conducted to show that children do not need to do any formal academics prior to moving off to primary school - this is what their prep year is for: preparation!

There seems to be a consensus that children are to have mastered a world of academic skills prior to making that transition to school. However, it is much more important that children are socially and emotionally ready for school.

When we say “socially ready”, we are referring to a child’s ability to negotiate their way out in the playground. School readiness is providing children with the basic skills needed to solve problems that may arise during interactions at school. They will need to demonstrate skills in problem solving & conflict resolution.

When we refer to a child being “emotionally ready”, we are referring to their ability to regulate their emotions and also cope with change, e.g. separating from their family, or meeting a new teacher.



Independence is also a very important aspect of school readiness. Children need the skills to look after their belongings, self-serve themselves meals, and toilet independently. They will also need to learn to manipulate stationery such as scissors, sticky tape, hole punchers, glue sticks etc.

We are not saying that learning mathematical concepts or literacy is not important. However, many people have an expectation that children will be able to count to a high number, recite the alphabet and write sentences prior to beginning school.

Children develop and mature at different rates, and will learn these skills in their own time. Yes, one child may be able to count to 100, but another child may be able to complete a 20 piece puzzle without any assistance. It depends on what they are most interested in and how much time they have had to engage with that activity.

Over the years, we have received

many compliments from teachers and principals of local schools, who have been very impressed by the children that have come from our service. They always tell us how clever, confident, resilient and independent they are.

We provide so many opportunities throughout the day for children to learn and extend on skills. We have group discussions about letters, numbers, shapes and colours. We provide a rich play environment full of experiences where they can explore these concepts. We use gentle intentional teaching practices to expand children’s knowledge. But, we do not make learning academics the focus of our time.

A brilliant quote I read recently says, *“The emphasis on improving literacy and numeracy outcomes must not come at the expense of rich play-based learning”* (Fleer).

This quote makes my heart skip a beat and I hope it resonates with you, too. Children & play go hand-in-hand. As mentioned earlier, play is defined as a child’s *“work”* & I must say, they’re exceptionally good at their jobs!



Bibliography and Further Reading

We would like to acknowledge the following resources and websites that were a source of inspiration while writing this first chapter of our Philosophy Series.

Many of these documents are beneficial for families as well as educators to read and find out more information on these important topics.

- **Play Based Learning**, by *Debbie Cole*
- **Learning and Developing Through Play**, by *Aistear*
- **Why Play is Important**, by *the Department of Education and Training*
- **The Theory of Loose Parts**, by *Let The Children Play* - <http://www.letthechildrenplay.net/2010/01/how-children-use-outdoor-play-spaces.html>
- **The Importance of Messy Play**, by *Liz Parnell* via *the Natural Child Magazine website* - <http://www.naturalchildmagazine.com/0808/messy-play.htm>
- **The Loose Parts Manual**, by *Morgan Leichter-Saxby & Suzanna Law* of *Pop-Up Adventure Play* - <http://www.playgroundideas.org/loose-parts-manual/>
- **How Process Art Experiences Support Preschoolers**, by *Laurel Bongiorno* via *the NAEYC website* - <http://www.naeyc.org/tyc/article/process-art-experiences>
- **Process vs. Product: The Importance of Individual Expression through Art**, by *Michelle Mallonée* via *the Pennsylvania Early Learning website* - <http://www.pakeys.org/uploadedContent/Docs/ERS/Process%20v%20Product.pdf>
- **Conceptual Play: Foregrounding Imagination and Cognition during Concept Formation in Early Years Education**, by *Marilyn Fleer* via *the Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood website* - <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.2304/ciec.2011.12.3.224>



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