

# Early Childhood Play: A Medium for Holistic Development

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## Abstract

*Understanding the importance of play in the overall development of children, the recent policy decisions and Pre-School Curriculum developed by NCERT recommend play based learning during the period. The author recommends for using play themes and play materials from immediate socio-cultural environment in our pre-schools for the optimum development of children.*


**Keywords:** *Childhood Play, Holistic Development*


## Article Publication


 Published Online: 20-Feb-2022

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 [10.31305/rrjim.2022.v07.i02.018](https://doi.org/10.31305/rrjim.2022.v07.i02.018)

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## Education during Early Childhood

Educationists and psychologists underline the importance of education during early childhood as it helps the holistic development of children which includes physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. National Education Policy 2020 has given much importance to ECCE and recommends for high-quality education during the period. Mashburn et al. (2008) pointed out that children who are experienced high-quality early childhood programs shows improved cognitive, social and emotional skills in school compare to the children who do not experience it.

## Importance of Play during Early Childhood

Understanding the significance of early childhood period for the overall development of a child, National Education Policy 2020 pointed out that more than 85 percent of a child's cumulative brain development happens before the age of six and it recommends for the stimulation of children's brain during the period. Play activities of children during early childhood plays a crucial role in the overall development. Keeping in view, the policy gives direction for ensuring quality ECCE through play and activity-oriented learning.

Psychologists and educationists establish that children engage mainly in play activities during the period and consider it as the natural way of learning. Free play activities in group as well as in single help physical, emotional, intellectual and social development of children during early childhood period.

Maria (2015) argues that in order to make children happy and encourage them to learn we should provide opportunities for play and facilities for using their physical skills, gross and fine motor skills. She also pointed out that many teachers find difficulty in balancing between academic learning and play oriented learning especially those who are adhere to standards. Ruth and Sandra (2021) pointed out that play activities start by children are the

primary source of learning during the early period. Further, they suggested that early childhood educators should utilise play as the medium and context of learning.

### **Play and Gender**

Many studies prove that there are gender differences in the play activities of children (Brove & Brove, 2017 & Holmes, 2011). Holmes (2011) also opined that gender differences are visible in children's play accordingly their skills also vary. It is also evident that boys are more inclined to physical play and also plays related with motor vehicles but girls like to play cooking, caring children, etc.

### **Play and Culture**

Socio-cultural environment plays a significant role as it decides how to play, what to play, where to play and when to play. According to Vygotsky learning occurs through social interactions of children with the people around them especially the peer group and their cultural experiences design the structure of their intellectual properties. Berk (1997) supports the view by arguing that culture decides quality, quantity and context of play.

It is an established fact that the experiences of children through free and guided play activities can help in attaining best outcomes in all the domains. It is evident from the policy as well as from the educationists around the world that that play is a good medium for learning and it is the best way to provoke brain. It is also proved that the children, who spend more time in play activities, are good in problem solving skills. Moreover, child learns best through firsthand and concrete experiences (Kaul and Bhatnagar, 1992).

### **Types of Early Childhood Play**

Children are engaged in different types of play like material play, physical play, imaginative play, etc. However, according to Scarlett, Sophie, Dorothy & Iris, (2005) imaginative play is the most predominant form of play from 18 months and to four or five years.

### **Imaginative Play**

Understanding the importance of imaginative play, Bright Horizons Education Team (2020) pointed out that this kind of play develops social skills, higher order thinking skills, emotional and social intelligence, etc. among children. Smilansky (1968) said that imaginative play includes the elements like make-believe, at least ten minutes duration, language and social interaction, etc. Bergen and Coscia (2001) added that the main areas of the brain like language, cognition, emotion, etc. are stimulated when a child engage in this kind of play that results in the development of dense synaptic connections in brain. Vygotsky considered imaginative play as the pre-requisite for academic learning and emphasized the importance of scaffolding based on imaginative play for the holistic development of children.

### **Preschool Curriculum Developed by NCERT and Early Childhood Play**

The preschool curriculum developed by NCERT pointed out that the vision of the curriculum is to maximise the individual by developing a solid foundation for lifelong especially through the medium of play. Understanding the importance of play, it pointed that while playing children depicts what they are learning and in which thing they are concerned about. The curriculum suggests for free and guided play that helps teachers in understanding their learning process and also helps in identifying the areas of intervention for guiding children to the next level of development.

During free play, children take their own decisions and understand rights and perspectives of their peer group. However, in guided or structured play the teachers have to do plan the play interventions for achieving the desired learning outcomes. Preschool Curriculum developed by NCERT in 2019 recommends spacious physical indoor and outdoor environment, interest areas for free play and availability of enough play materials.

It specifically recommends for large indoor space with well-designated activity/interest areas. The free play activities in this area with teacher-made materials, indigenous toys, etc. help children in developing various skills. It recommends play areas for doll play, imaginative play, music, art, science, etc. There are five critical domains in child's development-Physical and motor, socio- emotional, cognitive, language and literacy and creative art and aesthetic appreciation. While designing play activities care should be given for the development of all these domains.

### Recent Developments

Rao, Ranganathan, Kaur and Mukhopadhyaya (2021) argue that India has made tremendous progress in the area of early childhood care and education by framing National ECCE Policy, National ECCE Curriculum Framework and Quality Standards for ECCE in 2013. Also, added that these documents provide a complete framework for ensuring access, equity and quality in ECCE.

The NEP, 2020 stresses the importance of early childhood education by stating that *“Strong investment in ECCE has the potential to give all young children such access, enabling them to participate and flourish in the educational system throughout their lives. Universal provisioning of quality early childhood development, care, and education must thus be achieved as soon as possible, and no later than 2030, to ensure that all students entering Grade 1 are school ready”*.

For ensuring the quality the Policy says that *“It also includes a focus on developing social capacities, sensitivity, good behaviour, courtesy, ethics, personal and public cleanliness, teamwork, and cooperation. The overall aim of ECCE will be to attain optimal outcomes in the domains of: physical and motor development, cognitive development, socio-emotional-ethical development, cultural/ artistic development, and the development of communication and early language, literacy, and numeracy”*.

Keeping in view the importance of early childhood play, NIPUN Bharat Guidelines (2021) also says that *“Currently, few teachers have had the opportunity to be trained in a multilevel, play-based, student-centered style of learning that, according to extensive ECCE research, is so important for students in early grade school, particularly in Grades 1 and 2”*.

The National ECCE Curriculum Framework, 2013 recommends play-based approach for the overall development of the children during early childhood years and it recommends play-based learning for the “Preparatory Class”.

In order to ensure all children are prepared for school, National Education Policy recommends *“Three-month play-based school preparation module for all Grade-I students”*. As per the recommendations, NCERT developed ‘VIDYA PRAVESH’—Guidelines for Three-month Play-based School Preparation Module for Grade-I Children for ensuring smooth shift to school. It specifically suggests for learning experiences through play activities.

### Conclusion

It is evident from the discussion that play is the predominant and crucial activity of a child during early childhood years. Understanding the significance of play in overall development of children, policies formulated in this area recommend play based curriculum for early childhood years. Teachers and parents should provide opportunities and time for free and guided play for the overall development of children. Moreover, care may be given to use innovative low-cost play materials and play themes from their socio-cultural background for the holistic development of children.

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