



## Learning and developing through play

### Why play?

Lucy and Robbie are playing outside. Their neighbours, Mariuz and Paula, arrive. The four children set about making a 'tent' by hanging an old curtain over a fence and a garden seat. They then make a list of all the camping items they need. Lucy gets plastic containers and lollipop sticks for cooking while Mariuz gathers twigs for a camp fire. Robbie and Paula find coats and old cushions to make beds. Soon, Lucy and Mariuz are Mam and Dad and are taking their children, Robbie and Paula, on a camping trip that lasts for the whole afternoon. Sound familiar to you? Yes, that's because children love to play with family and friends.

Play is often described as children's 'work'. Playing helps your young child to

- **build relationships** – by being with others; sharing and taking turns; solving problems and negotiating like when two children or more want the same toy; being a leader and a follower; finding out how to join in play with others; learning about others' feelings
- **be creative** – when he/she makes outfits from old clothes; builds an apartment block out of junk material; makes a bowl from homemade play-dough and paints and decorates it with glitter for a sparkly look
- **read, write and learn about numbers** – when he/she 'reads' and tells stories; makes menus for the café or information booklets, posters and prescriptions for the veterinary clinic; pays for things in the pretend shop; writes down the scores of the matches for the news report; measures how many blocks are needed to build the road
- **think** – when a plan has to be made so the toy tractor can drive over the slippery mud; when deciding what items can be used to make a den; when figuring out how a sloped roof can be made and attached to the house of blocks
- **use language** – when he/she sings; says rhymes; tells jokes; takes on different roles in pretend play such as the hairdresser, the waiter, the security guard, or the dentist; explains the rules of a game
- **use small and large muscles** – when he/she builds an airport with Lego; cuts with scissors; draws pictures; makes things from play-dough; runs; jumps; plays ball games; climbs; cycles; skips; threads beads onto wool; makes chains from daisy flowers.

**Tip-sheet for parents of young children (2½–6 years)**

Read on for ideas from *Aistear* on how you can help your young child learn through different types of play. You can use many of these ideas outside as well as inside.

### Physical play

- Play games outside like *Hide and Seek*, football, frisbee, hula hoops, skittles (fill plastic bottles with sand or small stones).
- Encourage and help your child to use climbing frames, slides and swings.
- Join in as your child runs, hops, jumps over and crawls under or into objects, balances, cycles with or without stabilisers, and throws bean bags.
- Introduce your child to games you liked when you were a child like *Ring-a-ring a Rosy*, *Red Rover*, skipping with a rope, and *Hop-scotch*.
- Dance to different kinds of music; play musical statues or do actions to songs like the *Hokey Pokey*.
- Do puzzles, jigsaws, threading, sewing, or building together with blocks.
- Help your child to make a hidey-hole or a den. For example, use a blanket to hide a space under the stairs; throw a sheet over the branches of a tree or over a table or a few chairs; have a large box for a den. Watch your child turn the den into a spaceship, a cattle shed, a cinema. The possibilities are endless!

Play is important to me, and it is important for my learning and development.



Let me  
experience different  
types of play.

### Games with rules

- Rules in games become very important to young children. Often children make up these 'flexible' rules themselves. For example in pretend play *everyone has to knock before coming in, or girls are not allowed drive the digger!* When taking part in pretend play follow the rules your child makes.
- Give your child lots of opportunities to play games with rules, for example *Snakes and Ladders*, card games, *BINGO*, computer games, and word and number games. Join in and have fun playing with your child.

### Creative play

- Most children love making things. You can help by providing items such as crayons, paints, chalks, different types of paper, chubby pencils, old rolls of wallpaper, newspapers, magazines, old birthday cards, used postage stamps, paper plates, glitter, glue, scissors, scraps of fabric, cardboard boxes and tubes, and used wrapping paper and ribbons.
- Do projects together, for example make a model of a spaceship using a shoe box or make a bus using a large cardboard box; make cards for special occasions; create a collage from pictures cut out from magazines.
- Make instruments and use them to sing some of your child's favourite songs. For example, with a little imagination, and using cellotape, a shoe-box, a kitchen roll tube and some elastic bands you can make an amazing guitar!
- Paint together. Add glitter to your paintings for a magical touch or add lots of water and blow the paint on your paper to make funny shapes and patterns.
- Collect lollipop sticks and make things from them.

Sometimes  
I like to play on my own  
or with other children, and  
at other times I like you  
to play with me.

### Language play

- Play language and memory games like *I spy*, *Words beginning with ...* (each person adds a new word beginning with a particular letter to the list), or *I went to the shop and I bought ...* (each person adds an item to the list).
- Find rhyming words like *fat, pat, hat*, or use nonsense words like *ban, chan, gan*.
- Say tongue twisters like *She sells sea shells by the seashore*.
- Say nursery rhymes together and add lots of actions.
- Tell jokes, even the *Knock, knock* ones!
- Have a prop that helps you tell your child's favourite story. For example, in *The Gingerbread Man* make a sock puppet of the fox, or in the story *Little Bear* use a small teddy.
- Read and talk about stories using comments and questions: for example, *Hmmm, I wonder what that is. What would happen if ...?*
- Make up stories together. Listen to your child's stories. Let your imaginations flow!

## Pretend play

- Provide items that can help your child pretend to be other people like the bus-driver or postperson, or to be an animal, fairy or superhero. For example give him/her shoes, wallets, bags, jewellery, clothes, scarves, hats, lengths of fabric, cardboard wings, and capes. Take photos of him/her in role.
- Children also love to use everyday items in their play, for example containers, brushes, dust-pans, clocks, gardening tools, boxes, money, shopping bags, old hairdryers, kettles and toasters (with flexes cut off), measuring tapes, weighing scales, plastic bottles, old phones and cameras, old duvets and pillows, and used baby clothes for dressing dolls and teddies. A small stick can be a syringe in the doctor's surgery; a sweeping brush can be a horse; stools can be seats on a train!
- Give your child glue, cellotape, paper, pens, cardboard boxes, feathers, and so on so that he/she can make things like a mask, a telescope, a menu, and food for the sheep for the pretend play.
- Join in the play and take on the role that your child gives you – the witch, the pilot or the baby. Follow your child's lead.

You can help me to learn  
all sorts of things  
when we play together.

## Playing with your young child

Here are some tips which you might find useful as a parent.

1. Give your child **time** to play every day.
2. Provide **things** for your child to play with.  
Recycled materials like boxes, household items and old clothes are often more fun than bought toys and equipment, and they cost less.
3. **Join in** the play. Take on a role, make jokes and be **playful**.
4. Make **space** for play. As your child gets older he/she will probably spend more time playing with a particular thing or in a particular role, so having a place where your child can leave items and continue playing with them the next day is important.
5. When chatting, **ask** what your child was playing that day. Show that you **value play** whether it's at home, with the childminder, in pre-school, in playgroup or in primary school.
6. **Tell** your childminder or the staff in the pre-school, playgroup or primary school about the games, activities, nursery rhymes, and books your young child enjoys.

## Pre-school and primary school

Play matters and not just while your child is at home. It is also an important way for your child to learn when in pre-school, playgroup and primary school. *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, 2009 ([www.ncca.ie/earlylearning](http://www.ncca.ie/earlylearning)) and the *Primary School Curriculum*, 1999 ([www.curriculumonline.ie](http://www.curriculumonline.ie)) both highlight how important play is in helping young children to learn and develop.

Remember, play helps your young child learn many new skills and ideas, and build new information about how the world works. And very importantly, play is a fun way for your child to do all this. **Enjoy playing together.**