



## Parents' Handbook

# The benefits of play-based learning in nursery



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## Big decision, long-term consequences

**Deciding whether to keep your 3–4-year-old at nursery is often a financial decision or a desire to see your child within a more formal learning environment as soon as practical.**

Rarely are the benefits of keeping a child at nursery weighed up against the volume of research that shows that high quality Early Year Education and Care can set up a child for life. In this booklet, you will find an introduction to the science behind how very young children learn – and we hope become more aware of the learning that goes on day to day in a London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) nursery.





# Play-based learning

## So, what is the difference between nursery and school?

Early Years settings, school nurseries and Reception Classes operate within the same Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework. The big difference is in how these different settings implement the framework.

Schools tend to have a more structured approach to learning and some parents are drawn to this approach. To the untrained eye, child-initiated and play-based learning can appear to be less beneficial to children's learning. Play is a small word but is part of a very large body of research, which consistently demonstrates how play-based learning is incredibly important for young children.

Through play, children have the freedom to explore different ideas and scenarios, which supports the development of their communication, creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, all important for success throughout their educational journey and beyond.

Great educationalists, such as Friedrich Froebel, and psychologists, like Lev Vygotsky, describe play as children's hard work.



“

When we value play, we show that we are valuing childhood not just as a period of life that is preparation for adulthood, but as a critical time of life and development itself. Children need to explore and to learn. If we don't allow this, if we constantly push children, dictate their entire day, remove space and time for play, exploration and fun, we damage their development, the opposite of what we surely intend.”

”

Lindley, 2023, p.62





## More than ‘just playing’

The characteristics of effective teaching and learning as outlined in the EYFS framework (Department for Education, 2023) interpret different aspects of play:

- **Playing and exploring** – children investigate and experience things, and ‘have a go’, which sets them up to become willing to test and investigate new learning.
- **Active learning** – children concentrate and keep on trying if they encounter difficulties and enjoy achievements, which builds their resilience and willingness to work through learning challenges.
- **Creating and thinking critically** – children develop their own ideas, make links between ideas and develop strategies for doing things, forming their ability to solve problems and seek solutions to challenges.



This is only some of the learning children gain from playing; whether child-directed or supported by adults (including siblings, parents and nursery teachers).



Teaching in the Early Years is an art, craft and science. It requires skilled and well-trained staff. It is very specific to young children and not a ‘watered down’ version of what happens in Primary School. Ofsted describes effective Early Years as that which involves ‘communicating and modelling language, showing, explaining, demonstrating, exploring ideas, encouraging, questioning, recalling, providing a narrative for what children are doing, facilitating and setting challenges’ (Ofsted inspection handbook, 2024).

Adults who are skilled at supporting young children’s learning through play can utilise all of these teaching approaches and tap into children’s enormous learning potential. When children have the freedom to work towards meeting their own goals, rather than those set by an adult, they become more motivated to learn. They are able to test their theories, experiment with new concepts, free from the pressure of ‘getting it wrong’.

Completing challenges, mastering new skills and receiving positive feedback during play all contribute to a child’s sense of accomplishment and self-worth, and should never be undervalued as it is helping them to view themselves as capable learners. This does not preclude them having differentiated and extended goals set for them to stretch them and ensure they are achieving natural developmental milestones.



## Language Development



Play also supports young children's language development, which is critical throughout a child's life. Through play, children engage in conversation, narrate stories and ask questions. It is important that adults support children's language development by introducing new vocabulary in an appropriate context, responding to and building on their communication. You will often hear LEYF teachers talking about the new and interesting words they have introduced to the children. This is important because vocabulary development during pre-school years is related to confident reading skills, the ability to think and school success in general.

Interaction with their peers also enables children to learn from each other, as they engage in conversation about their shared activities, games and goals. This constant interaction helps them develop vocabulary, sentence structure and communication skills, all of which are fundamental to early literacy development.

During Early Years, it is vital that children develop a love of listening to and reading stories. Our dialogic reading approach, where children are given the opportunity to become the storyteller rather than the listener, ensures that rather than being a passive experience, children are prompted to become active contributors, recalling familiar stories and hypothesising about what will happen next. Listen in to a session where your child is contributing to storytelling and you will hear about a world full of anacondas, princesses and the fight between good and evil. This is very valuable: 'there is evidence that experience of dialogic reading correlates with future literacy skills' (Watkins, 2018).

Phonological awareness, vocabulary development and an understanding of symbolic representation are all central to children's early literacy development. If children are introduced too early to structured phonics activities, it can turn the joy of learning to read into a chore and prevent children from developing a lifelong appreciation of literature. Phonics teaches children the relationship between written letters or groups of letters and sounds. For this reason, teaching phonics should ideally start between the ages of 4–7 years, but this is dependent on a child's developmental stage. If a child knows the names and shapes of letters, they are more likely to process phonics.



Sometimes flashcards are used to teach children letter sounds, but having fun is an important element of Early Years learning as when they feel relaxed and safe, children (who essentially are constantly exploring and discovering) have valuable 'aha' moments. At LEYF, we think creatively and might plan an outdoor scavenger hunt, encouraging children to find as many objects as they can beginning with a particular sound.



### Tips:

#### Dialogic reading

Prompts supports communication and early literacy development for example:

- **Completion prompt** - Leave a blank at the end of a sentence and encourage your child to fill it in.
- For example "We can't go over it, we can't go under it. Oh no! We've got to go \_\_\_\_\_"
- **Open ended prompt** - Using the pictures in the book, ask your child open ended questions.
- For example "What do you think the bear was looking for?" or "How do you think the bear was feeling at the end?"
- To find out more about dialogic reading please visit our website [here](#)
- **Find objects beginning with a particular letter** - helps to develop phonological awareness, key to early literacy.

Watkins, P. (2018). *Extensive reading for primary in ELT Part of the Cambridge Papers in ELT series.* [pdf] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Mathematical Skills

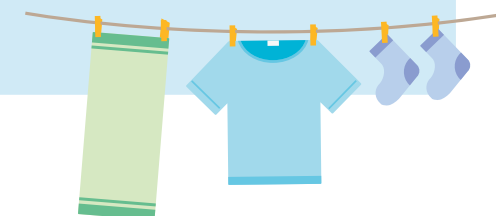


Play also supports children's growing understanding of mathematical concepts. Being able to recite numbers 1 to 10 may initially seem impressive, but it doesn't necessarily equate to a child's mathematical knowledge: children often learn to recite numbers in order because they have memorised the words, in the same way that they learn the words to a song, rather than understanding that numbers represent quantities.

The ability to understand the cardinal principle (that when counting objects, the last number is the total number of objects in the group), or subitise (quickly deduce how many objects are in a group without counting them individually, e.g. a group of 3 dinosaurs), are all developed through play. Sorting toys, building structures and engaging in pretend play with numbers and shapes naturally introduces children to basic mathematical concepts.

#### Some ideas to help their Mathematical Skills:

- **Counting activities** - such as counting red cars on the walk home - this supports the development of early maths.
- **Helping to sort laundry** - supports early maths, as children sort clothes into categories, count and pair socks.



## Social and Emotional Development

Research shows that play is also important in the development of young children's social and emotional skills, as it provides opportunities for children to interact with each other, learn to share, cooperate and negotiate. This helps them develop important social skills like teamwork, empathy and resolving conflict.



Playing out different emotions in pretend play or expressing their feelings through creative activities helps children understand and manage their emotions effectively, an important life skill referred to as self-regulation. Play also provides opportunities for children to take risks, make mistakes and learn from them, which builds resilience and problem-solving skills that are essential for future success.

Young children are constantly in the process of learning what constitutes appropriate behaviour, and while doing so they may challenge boundaries. In schools, it is common for reward charts or the removal of things children enjoy to be used as tools to reinforce behavioural boundaries. These approaches are largely considered outdated, as they often teach children to 'obey' due to external motivation, rather than teaching them why boundaries exist and helping them develop the internal motivation to follow these.

At LEYF, we never use these tools, instead we adopt approaches which support children's developing understanding and empathy towards others. Children are encouraged to make choices and reflect on how they can make a situation 'right', such as being encouraged to return a toy that they have taken from one of their peers.



Natural consequences are also an effective way to support children's understanding, for example, if a child throws a toy on the ground, it will break and they will no longer be able to use it. At LEYF, all behaviour is viewed as communication and teachers will seek to address the cause of behaviour that veers outside our boundaries, rather than simply responding to children's actions.

## Some ideas to help their Social and Emotional Development

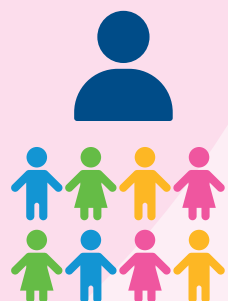
- **Making friends** - by being helped to negotiate and engage with other children empathetically.
- **Teaching children to dress themselves** - (supports independence, gives children sense of accomplishment).





## Smaller Ratios

A compelling reason to keep a young child at nursery is ratios. School settings often operate with higher ratios than nurseries, with primary school nurseries often using a 1:13 ratio, and reception classes 1 teacher per 30 children (this doesn't include teaching assistants and reception classes tend to have at least one teaching assistant so it is often a 2:30 ratio, but this is not a requirement). At LEYF, we operate on a maximum of a 1:8 ratio for our children over 3 years old, even though Government regulations would allow us to operate with higher ratios.



**1:8 ratio  
for our children  
over 3  
years old**

This means that every child receives more individual attention throughout the day. LEYF teachers can offer more tailored learning experiences by adapting planned activities and interactions to individual strengths and interests, maximising the learning potential of every adult-child interaction.

The enhanced interactions that occur as a result of smaller adult-child ratios enable every child to develop a close and nurturing relationship with their keyperson. These harmonious relationships are central to providing children with the emotional security to express themselves, ask for help, challenge themselves and try new things.

In addition to the learning benefits, smaller adult-child ratios have advantages from a health and well-being perspective. When responsible for a smaller group of children, teachers are more able to identify and mitigate potential hazards and stop preventable

accidents from occurring. If a child is uncharacteristically quiet, eating less than usual, or hasn't helped themselves to a cup of water all morning, teachers are more likely to notice earlier than they would were they responsible for a larger group, and therefore can respond to the child's needs more quickly.

## Specialists in early childhood development

It is widely acknowledged that the education and care of children in the Early Years requires in-depth knowledge of the development of children from birth to 5 years old. At LEYF, our teachers are specialists in this phase of child development and our pedagogy is based on international research, theory and best practice. In primary school, the nursery and reception classes are generally led by qualified primary school teachers, who may not have received specialist training or have much experience of teaching children during this critical period of their lives.



Every LEYF nursery is led by a Manager and Deputy Manager who have experience of and are trained to work with children under 5 years old. This means they can provide pedagogical support, mentorship, coaching and guidance to their teams, to ensure that teaching consistently remains developmentally appropriate and of a high quality. This is also supported by a LEYF specialist Pedagogy Coach.



## Children learn about the world through play

We hope this booklet has helped to explain the learning that goes on every day when your child is playing, and that play is more valuable than you might have imagined for our little explorers. The first 5 years are all about children discovering and investigating how the world around them works. They are also learning to find their place in that world.

When a child goes to school, these skills and learning dispositions are very important. Primary school teachers often remark that they can tell when a child has had a good nursery education as they are confident to ask for help when they need it, make new friends and demonstrate a willingness to learn new things. Pushing a child too early into formal learning can be counterproductive. Opportunities for children to play have reduced over recent years. This limits children's opportunities to interact, to exercise and to learn the important physical and social skills. If they miss out on the benefits of play, it impacts on their well-being. Play is a powerful force for learning and development and is one that we nurture at LEYF.



If you are a parent at a LEYF nursery, please ask one of our teachers to explain the learning behind an activity. And if you are not a LEYF parent, please get in touch and we will organise a visit where you will get to hear first-hand about the wonderful learning that children experience every day.

## Other tips and activities to explore



Home-made playdough – helps develop fine motor skills and manual dexterity, essential for writing

### Playdough recipe

#### You will need

- flour
- hot water
- salt
- baby oil

#### What to do

1. Add just enough flour to the bowl and some baby oil.
2. Add water and mix it all together.
3. Keep adding splashes of water and flour, until it reaches a doughy consistency.
4. Use your hands to knead it all together. It's important to knead the playdough so it's similar to bread.
5. Knead it for a little while just until you get a solid ball, which then the children can rip apart and make objects and shapes out of it.
6. You can also add colouring to create different coloured playdough.



Homemade playdough will last for up to three months, as long as it is stored in an airtight container.

Science experiments supports critical thinking, cause and effect. Encouraging children to say what they think will happen and why, then ask them whether they were correct.

## Water and Ink experiment

### You will need

- water-based felt tip pens
- kitchen towel
- water



### What to do

1. Cut the kitchen towel into strips. Draw circles on your kitchen towel quite close to the bottom of a strip.
2. Children might like to do their colours in rainbow order. Can they remember the order of the rainbow colours?
3. Dip the kitchen towel gently into a jug, bowl or glass of water. Only the very edge of the kitchen towel should touch the water – the water shouldn't reach the colours.
4. Even though the colours aren't in the water, they should start to travel up the kitchen towel.
5. Talk to your child about how high the colours travel and which colour they think will travel the furthest or the fastest.
6. Children could experiment with using just one colour or different shapes to see how far the colours spread.

Cooking activities (support scientific thinking as children see how ingredients are transformed, the maths behind measuring ingredients, enhance their language as they name ingredients and cooking utensils)

## Vegetable Soup Recipe

### What you need

- sweetcorn
- onion
- garlic
- potatoes
- sweet potato
- celery
- carrots
- fresh tomatoes
- tinned tomatoes

But you can use whatever vegetables you have left in the fridge which need to be used up.

### What to do

1. Wash all of your vegetables, then chop them up. The vegetables don't need to be cut small, as they will be blended.
2. Once chopped, vegetables should be washed again and placed in a large pan of water, with a clove of garlic.
3. Bring the vegetables to the boil and, once they are soft, blitz with a blender to make your soup.
4. Serve with bread for a warming and nutritious lunch.

You can find out other ideas for learning at home for your baby, toddler or pre-school child [here on our website](#)







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