

SUPPORTING PURPOSEFUL PLAY

Leading practice paper: 1

Quality preschools



Introduction

The leading practice papers are a component of the Preschool Quality Model that will help us to achieve high-quality educational preschool programs underpinned by excellence in teaching and learning.

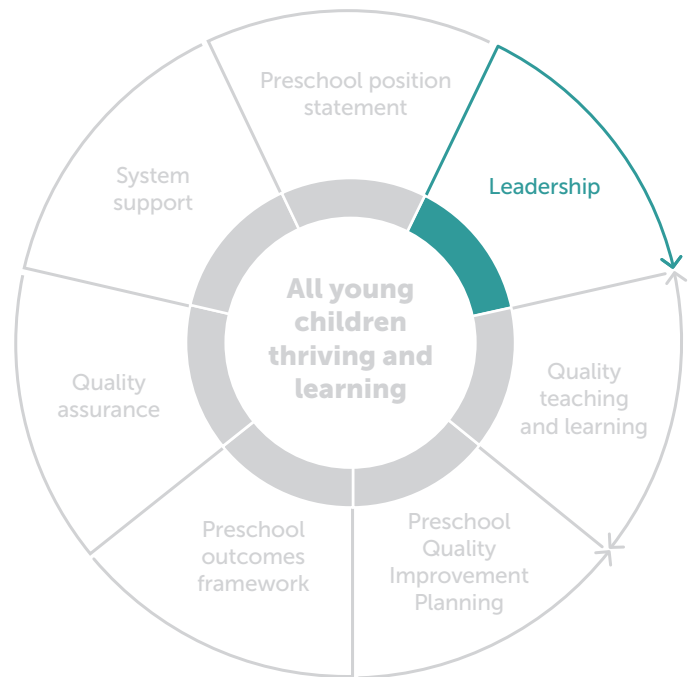
The resources aligned to the model are designed to help preschool leaders be clear about our priorities and planning for improvement in teacher and educator practice. These resources complement and support the work preschools are already doing to support all young children to thrive and learn. They also assist our system to achieve the goal of every preschool exceeding the National Quality Standard in quality areas 1, 5 and 7.

The leading practice papers are situated in the leadership domain of the preschool quality model because they support preschool leaders to lead the teaching and learning.

It is the role of the Educational Leader to collaborate with teachers and educators to promote a culture of improvement, provide guidance and direction in high quality teaching and learning programs and practices, and guide professional inquiry to build knowledge, reflect on practice and generate new ideas. The leading practice papers provide a snapshot of contemporary early childhood research applied in the context of South Australian government preschools and are designed to assist preschool leaders in this work.

Each paper defines the specific focus on practice, sets out what research tells us about why it matters, gives examples of how it can be applied, and provides provocations and prompts for reflecting on that aspect of practice, including with regards to the NQS Exceeding Themes.

The first 2 leading practice papers focus on supporting purposeful play and intentional teaching.



Our system recognises and values the work of all educators who work with children to progress learning. This includes teachers, early childhood workers, school service officers and support staff. However, we recognise the professional role and responsibility of early childhood teachers to plan for and assess children's learning and development and therefore use both 'teachers' and 'educators' throughout this resource.

SUPPORTING PURPOSEFUL PLAY

Key Messages

Purposeful play is an intentional strategy preschool and early years of school teachers and educators use to extend and enrich children's learning

High-quality teacher and educator interactions enhance children's learning through purposeful play and should be a significant part of the preschool program

Effective teachers are the most significant element in the impact of early childhood education on outcomes for children

Intentional teachers and educators consider how children are learning and what is being learned as children play

Preschool leaders guide critical reflection on purposeful play in their preschool



Tips for using this paper in leading quality improvement

Use the content, prompts and provocations to lead reflective practice:

- in professional discussions with individuals, in teams and within your networks
- through a review of your centre statement of philosophy
- informing your challenge of practice in your Preschool Quality Improvement Plan
- within self-reflection processes and educator journaling
- when exploring connections and continuity of learning with junior primary peers
- within professional learning communities/ communities of practice
- as you engage further with other sources of research.



What is purposeful play?

Play is linked to the development of a range of skills, knowledge and dispositions for young children. Through play children build theories and ideas about how the world works and their role in it.

Play supports social, emotional, language, cognitive and physical development. It lies along a continuum from unstructured child initiated free play at one end to highly structured adult directed play at the other. In our preschools and through transition to school the focus is on play as a context for learning, or purposeful play.

Purposeful play is an intentional strategy early years teachers and educators use to extend and enrich children's learning as reflected in Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) learning outcomes. The EYLF emphasises the importance of play-based learning, coupled with intentional teaching as a principle pedagogical approach in the early years.

Purposeful play in this context is about the role teachers and educators play when they are actively involved in creating learning environments for children to engage in or are involved in the play with children. While clearly children benefit from both unstructured free play and more structured adult led play, high-quality teacher and educator interactions enhance children's learning through purposeful play and should be a significant part of the preschool program.



What does the research tell us about why purposeful play matters?

When children are actively involved in play, they are both 'hands on and minds on' (Zosh et al. 2017, p.23).

Meaningful, purposeful play is connected to children's experiences and knowledge, and enables them to create further meaning, engage more in discovery, test out ideas and hypotheses, explore, create and persevere. There is evidence to show that children's critical thinking skills, language and creativity are enhanced by engaging with others through play (Jensen et al. 2019).

When children initiate or lead play, they are drawing on what interests or intrigues them. They may be exploring ideas or theories for the first time or over time. They are intrinsically motivated and engaged, and sensitive, responsive and intentional teacher and educator involvement in this play can enhance the child's learning and development (see also [leading practice paper 2: intentional teaching](#)).

Vygotsky (1978) argued that it is through play that children learn to self-regulate and to control their environment and their learning, and that play has a crucial role in developing symbolic representation through art, music, dance, language and mathematical notation. From this comes the ability to think creatively, problem-solve and reflect. Edwards (2017) draws on Vygotsky's explanation of how children develop mature concepts through connecting their everyday experiences to more academic or scientific ideas to make the link between play and intentional teaching. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) describes how effective teachers can introduce children 'to the cultural tools that they require to integrate fully as contributing members of the society around them' such as language, symbols and knowledge through strategies of co-construction in purposeful play.

A meta study reflecting on the educator role found that early childhood educators, regardless of qualification, take a non-interventionist approach in children's play, setting up environments for open-ended play and mainly engaging to enhance children's language rather than their ideas (Sumsion et al. 2014). However, the importance of quality teacher interactions with children was demonstrated in the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva 2004) and in the E4 Kids study (Tayler 2016), where those preschool settings that had been assessed as being excellent had educators who co-constructed ideas with children rather than simply setting up environments for them. Indeed, effective teachers are the most significant element in the impact of early childhood education on outcomes for children.

Yelland (2011) suggests that whilst children undoubtedly learn through play, the role of the teacher is to enhance this through a pedagogy of playful engagement with children; to extend children's play, not to take over or interrupt it (Jensen et al. 2019). It is to be responsive, relational and in tune with the child. Teaching and learning are seen as a social process of co-constructing knowledge through dialogue and experiences in a context which is meaningful to the child. (Pramling et al. 2019).

Intentional teachers and educators consider how children are learning and what is being learned as children play.

What this means in practice

Rich, purposeful play isn't just that designed and led by teachers. Throughout a preschool day children have opportunities for initiating play, entering the play of others, watching play, exploring, engaging, being physical, following routines and being part of teacher led experiences.

These offer opportunities for you to extend the play, deepen or develop meaning with children, expand children's thinking and ideas and support children to develop dispositions for learning. There is evidence (Edwards 2017) that children blend what they have explored and learned in purposeful play throughout their free play, integrating ideas and theories and making connections.

Your role in planning for and promoting purposeful play is to be intentional by considering how children will benefit from it: how their skills, knowledge, understandings, dispositions, identities, participation and relationships will be enhanced. The second important strategy is to intentionally engage with children to co-construct ideas and understandings, provoke curiosity and wonder and to enhance and stretch children's learning and development within and around the play.

When teachers and educators are intentionally planning for and engaging children in purposeful play, they are using the power of children's play as a context for teaching and assessing learning and development.

Child initiated and led, adult planned environment

How you plan and establish your learning environments will affect the way children play in them. Environments that actively encourage purposeful play will challenge and inspire children to explore, investigate, represent or rework understandings, follow ideas, develop theories and master skills. Some of what you plan will be to build on play ideas that you have observed in individuals, small groups and whole of preschool groups of children. Some will be to provoke new responses from children, others to introduce different experiences.

Rich environments enable children to engage in multiple ways, following their interests and ideas, and stretching their learning. When you offer open-ended materials children are able to be resourceful and creative. When children can plan their play environments, they are able to be purposeful and may need to collaborate with others.

Your role in child initiated and led play is to make connections, recognise strengths and provide stretch to enhance the learning in children's play and build on it in authentic ways. Intentionally using strategies like commenting, asking open-ended questions, modelling, challenging, facilitating, or supporting children in describing their thinking and reasoning enhances and deepens children's play and learning. If your focus for a child or group of children is on an aspect of numeracy, then you could introduce or revisit mathematical language, concepts, elements or learning processes in a way that makes sense to the child and their play. You might propose an authentic problem to be collaboratively explored within the play. 'Playful and integrated pedagogical models depend on teachers' ability to recognise and act on possible links between play and content in a genuine way. This is in contrast to trying to slip content disingenuously into children's play, emphasizing content as if it were the only end-goal of play or teaching content didactically' (Hedges 2014, p.200).

Being actively involved in a child's play is not the only way to support their learning. You might revisit and reflect on the play with the child later to clarify, perhaps make plans for extending the play or support them to represent their play and thinking in some way.

Adult guided, child directed play

Adult guided experiences should build on the observations you have made about children's interests, ideas, interactions and skills, to introduce new possibilities, extend or consolidate children's thinking and ideas. These can be invitations or provocations, material or verbal, and designed for an individual child, small groups or whole of preschool groups of children. They can be planned for or emerge as a response to children's play.

Your role in these experiences is to let the children direct where they take the play then collaborate with them, leading them to think, plan, go deeper or reflect beyond what they might do on their own. Sustained shared thinking is one pedagogical practice to do this, where two or more people work together to solve a problem, clarify an idea or deepen thinking. All participants need to be genuinely engaged in the conversation. Open-ended questions and wonderings are important in this process.



Reflecting on and leading purposeful play in your setting

The following prompts can be used to lead reflection on purposeful play in your preschool. You might use them as discussion starters or to guide your thinking as you reflect and plan for individuals, small groups and whole of preschool groups of children.

- What are the conditions for purposeful play? Do we ensure these conditions are available?
- How and when do teachers and educators respond to children's play in this setting? Is it intentional and linked to learning goals in authentic ways?
- What learning is likely to arise and for whom? Who might be disadvantaged? How does this reflect the Learning Outcomes and the Indicators of Preschool Numeracy and Literacy?
- How can we relaunch children's play to ensure children's skills, knowledge and dispositions are stretched?
- How are we intentionally planning for play and educators' actions within play?
- Is our planning offering a balance of play types to support learning and development goals for all children?
- Do play opportunities and environments provided with and for children align with our curriculum decisions?
- How can we enhance the ways we observe and assess children's learning and development during play?

NQS Exceeding themes

- What research and guidance do we utilise to critically reflect on purposeful play in our planning cycle and on our role in purposeful play?
- How is practice embedded – do we have a shared theoretical understanding that is reflected consistently in practice at our site?
- How are we building capacity and extending the practice of all teachers and educators to plan for and facilitate purposeful play?
- How can we genuinely involve families in our planning for play, and build partnerships and shared understandings about the value of purposeful play?

Useful resources

Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority 2018, National Quality Standard Information Sheet Quality Area 7: The role of the educational leader

https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-05/QA7_TheRoleOfTheEducationalLeader.pdf.

Commonwealth of Australia 2009, Educators Belonging, Being & Becoming: educators’ guide to the early years learning framework for Australia, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace (DEEWR)

https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/acecqa/files/National-Quality-Framework-Resources-Kit/educators_guide_to_the_early_years_learning_framework_for_australia_2.pdf, see pages 30 - 33

Early Childhood Australia 2021, Finding the balance: play-based learning and intentional teaching

<http://thespoke.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/finding-the-balance/>

Early Childhood Australia 2022, Leading play-based pedagogies

<http://thespoke.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/leading-play-based-pedagogies/>

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