

2023 Premier’s Early Childhood Education Scholarship

How play promotes wellbeing in young children

(and minimises challenging behaviour)

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# Introduction

My study explored how play can promote wellbeing in young children. It details evidence from brain science, the importance of flow, looking at behaviour through a cup-filling lens, trauma-informed practice and practical application.

I always believed play was important for young children’s learning and development, however, my scholarship study gave me new insight into how long periods of play is essential for children’s wellbeing. With this discovery, I also noted a decrease in behaviour we might find challenging.

Long periods of uninterrupted play provide time and opportunity for children to develop flow, agency, efficacy, and positive dispositions towards lifelong learning. The Early Years Learning Framework states, “When children have positive experiences and can exercise agency, they develop an understanding of themselves as significant, respected and feel a sense of belonging.” (EYLF V2.0 2022, p.30).

It is essential for life fulfillment to experience periods of positive wellbeing. During one of our Zoom calls, Sandi Phoenix suggested in promoting wellbeing, you need: 1. Connections and Relationships, and 2. Flow (being deeply connected to what you are doing). This happens naturally through play. “Because the child at play is not worrying about his or her future, and because the child at play suffers no real-world consequences for failing, the child at play is not afraid of failure.” (Gray 2013, p.154). Moments when children can store memories of fun and joy – and develop resilience through play – add a protective factor that supports mental health and wellbeing.

# Focus of Study

My study tour focused on discovering how long, uninterrupted periods of play might impact on children’s wellbeing. This was to be researched through recommended courses and mentoring sessions from Sandi Phoenix; invitation of world-renowned neuroscience educator, Nathan Wallis, to workshops with educators and parents in our local community; zoom calls with experts in our early childhood field, Beth Macgregor, Rae Pica, Barb O’Neill, Susan Sharpe; reading Free to Learn by Peter Gray and Centre visits.

“Children come into this world burning to learn and genetically programmed with extraordinary capacities for learning.” (Gray 2013, prologue). The Early Years Learning Framework defines play as “fundamental to the healthy development and wellbeing of individuals and communities. It is often defined by a range of characteristics including freely chosen, self-directed, pleasurable, meaningful, symbolic, and intrinsically motivating.” (EYLF V2.0 2022, p.67). Peter Gray also adds, “play involves an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind.” (Gray 2013, p.140).

Wellbeing, according to Be You, encompasses the health of the whole person, physical, mental, social, and emotional and it is a continuum. With high wellbeing, people can function to the best they can with life’s everyday experiences and can bounce back after a setback or trauma. “Wellbeing is related to resilience, providing children with the capacity to cope with day-to-day stress and challenges.” (EYLF V2.0 2022, p.44).

# Significant Learning

### Play for wellbeing

Play is how children develop intrinsic interests, learn how to solve problems, exert self-control, learn to regulate their emotions, get along with others and experience joy; through all of these effects, play promotes positive mental health and wellbeing (O’Neill, July 2023 TCB training). Play is something children do without adults and results in lifelong learning.

At this point, I need to clarify that when play, or free play, is mentioned in this report, it does not mean neglect or merely supervision. It means there is a qualified adult to scaffold, support, know where the child’s development is, jump in when we can offer value, but the adult does not lead the play (TOTES, Nathan Wallis).

The Early Years Learning Framework cites, “Children’s immersion in their play illustrates how play enables them to simply enjoy being.” (EYLF V2.0 2022 p.21). During our zoom call, Rae Pica talked about children being in the here and now. We need to honour the age and stage they are at, focus on what the children can do now, their positives and strengths, and they need to become aware of their own strengths, which will boost individual wellbeing.

**FLOW:** Achieving flow is one of the biggest contributors to wellbeing (Topic 3, Understanding and supporting Children’s behaviour). According to Peter Gray, flow is the ideal state for learning new things, the ideal state for high-order thinking, not thinking about yourself, but what you are doing, you’re not attentive to the clock, and you are immersed in the activity. Research shows that if you are in a state of flow (even adults) you are better at solving problems and are more creative.

Flow allows for focus and concentration, inner clarity, sense of serenity, timelessness, and intrinsic motivation. You must allow at least 45 minutes to achieve a state of flow. We need children to get into flow to allow for maximum brain development, not go with the clock. In the Early Years Learning Framework, we are asked to look at engaged and sustained involvement by children in our programs. This is flow. Children need uninterrupted time, as if they sense you are getting ready for a transition, they will avoid flow (TOTES, Kristy Morgan). While visiting several centres, I noticed the children had time to become involved in their play, without the constraints of packing away or coming to a group session or morning tea. I observed the calmness of the children throughout the day and their involvement with peers and educators.

This understanding has led our centre extending on our uninterrupted periods of play throughout the day. We introduced progressive mealtimes and non-compulsory groups into our play periods. In a short period of time (less than a term) we have noticed a calmer demeanour in our children, especially from children who exhibited challenging behaviour. Or as I now like to use the terms; “spirited behaviour” (Louise Porter) or “behaviour that challenges you” (Sandi Phoenix). Educators can attune with individual children, and children have more choice and agency during their day as they decide when to eat and what activities are placed in the room. Every centre has diversity in the classroom and this method caters for all individuals and their needs. The Early Years Learning Framework states “viewing children as active participants and decision-makers opens possibilities for educators to move beyond preconceived expectations about what children can do and learn.” (EYLF V2.0 2022, p.8).

**AGENCY:** “Each child’s agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions that influence events and their world” (NQS QA1 Standard 1.2 Element 1.2.3). The more that children can do for themselves, the healthier they’re going to grow as an adult. When individuals feel out of control they develop “learned helplessness” (when everyone around them makes decisions for them). In contrast, when children are free to express themselves and from unnecessary constraints, they show higher self-esteem, develop appropriate self-regulation skills, are less aggressive and experience less stress, depression, and anxiety (Louise Porter 2020, p.56).

**EFFICACY:** Self-efficacy is the extent we believe we are in command to what happens to us, that I am effective at running my life, and one of the most important characteristics in distinguishing well-adjusted people (BESST 2020). This is obtained through play. Things that create anxiety is a fear of being out of control. Having long periods of play where children can decide, are intrinsically motivated and can take control of their learning, honours self-efficacy. Adventurous and courageous play helps develop confidence, resilience, and a sense that ‘I can handle the world’ (Wearthy podcast, Nathan Wallis).

**DISPOSITION:** Nathan Wallis says disposition is one of the most important characteristics for individuals to succeed. Disposition is the emotional attitude you bring towards learning. If they enjoy what they are doing, children’s persistence can exceed adults (catch cry, again, again) (Topic 2, Understanding and supporting behaviour). When children set their own goals and receive intrinsic rewards, they feel worthy; to then think, I’ll have a go at that new experience. The Early Years Learning Framework states, “Wellbeing and a strong sense of connection, optimism, resilience and engagement enable children to develop a growth mindset, and a positive attitude to learning.” (EYLF V2.0 2022, p.9).

### Brain development

Brain development is Nathan Wallis’ expertise and listening to him deliver a whole-day workshop for educators and an evening talk for caregivers, broadened the knowledge of many that day. Nathan spoke about the development of the brain from the bottom up. When children are 3- 5 years old, they operate solely in the social/emotional brain (limbic system) and are not ready to learn academics. Nathan spoke about play opportunities for enhancing wellbeing, such as developing dispositions for learning, including resilience, joy and fun, trial and error, social skills, emotional regulation, and engagement. To speed up learning with happy feelings, Nathan recommends singing, laughing, and moving physically.

Nathan also spoke about children succeeding in their play; they will try multiple times in different ways to succeed, hence increasing lifelong resilience and creative problem-solving. This skill will stay with them throughout the ups and downs of everyday life. The opposite is a whole group session doing numbers, letters or days of the week, where there is a right and wrong answer, and you have one attempt to either succeed or fail. This is no good for mental health. “When children are playing, they are activating their brains. Through repetition in their play, practicing and lots of opportunities to play, children are developing connections in their brain that are the foundations for lifelong learning.” (Power of Play 2023).

Nathan Wallis explained that children are still in rapid brain growth up to eight years of age, and hence development is taking place at different rates. He says it doesn’t matter if you can read and write at 5 or at 7.5 years because at 8 you wouldn’t know who learned earlier. Therefore, we need to concentrate on play in the younger years to promote children’s wellbeing, not academic learning. We also need to look at school readiness; Nathan said children are not yet six years old, therefore they are not developmentally ready to complete traditional school readiness skills, and he adds, “We don’t practice with a walking frame before we need to use one.”

### Phoenix cups

Sandi Phoenix mentored me throughout my study tour, allowing me to critically reflect on our current practice and offering new insights into the benefits of play for children’s wellbeing and how to implement the Phoenix cup strategy. There are five cups: safety, connection, freedom, mastery and fun. If we look at behaviour through a cup lens, we can see all behaviour as a need. Full cups are a strong wellbeing and empty cups are a meltdown. Children need to learn how to fill their cups without impacting and emptying other cups (Jayden and Sally video). Well-behaved children don’t behave well because of rules, they do so because they can with full cups (BESST 2020).

We are beginning to use cup language in our room for educators and children. When children feel secure (safety) they are confident enough to experiment, try and fail and try again (mastery), take risks to form friendships (connection), choose to do what brings them joy (fun), and take charge of their learning (freedom). Play provides long sessions of time for children to fill their cups, especially if children can reach their flow state.

With the phoenix cup analogy, we also examined the topic of school readiness. Diverting from the historical view and offering a transitioning to school program that scaffolds children in teaching them how to fill their own cups is more appropriate (Transitioning to School, TOTES). It is educators’ and parents’ responsibility to make sure children can fill their cups in a socially acceptable way, enhancing a positive wellbeing. This way we teach consideration and co-operation instead of compliance and obedience (TOTES, Transitioning to School).

When we examine compulsory large group learning we need to look at brain development and what is best practise for children. Children’s concentration is roughly 3 minutes x their age, so five-year-olds can concentrate for roughly 15 minutes, unless in flow. Also, children work best in groups of one more than their age (Topic 2, Understanding and supporting children’s behaviour). Taking this into account, how do we expect three- and four-year-olds to attend compulsory teacher-led whole groups. Even if you have the most engaging group, there will still be children up the back of the mat who are not interested, and consequently, causing a disruption and emptying their cups.

During my study, experts in their field all concluded that non-compulsory group learning was best and according to brain science, developmentally appropriate. Those children who never come to group can have their needs met and concentration extended on a one-to-one basis, through their interest (TOTES, Nathan Wallis). When they choose to attend group, children choose to manage their impulses and behaviour, and that is better preparation for school than learning to sit and do as they are told (BESST 2020). Using their own love of learning, interacting, and using their own self-control.

During children’s last year before school, they need a rich play-based program that meets their needs and fills their cups. Parents sometimes are worried that children will fall behind if they have not started academics and worried that children are not going to learn unless we teach it to them. When children want to learn and are interested, they will learn it quickly. Play is not easy; “Much of the joy of play lies in the challenges. A playful activity that becomes too easy loses its attraction and ceases to be play. The player then modifies the activity to make it harder.” (Gray 2013, p.154).

This is why we have discarded our traditional whole group learning to non-compulsory intentional learning during play. Our team of educators has noticed many children attend the group and because it is open to come and go, even the children who did originally resist group times, come and join in, usually for the entire session. During my school visits, I noticed that group attendance is compulsory, group work is the same for all and they offer free choice of activities within a certain subject. This then raised the question, if the children have not been exposed to this type of learning before they enter school, how will they adjust? This has already been discussed earlier in this report, however, to reiterate: If children have positive wellbeing, their cups are full or they know how to fill them and they have confidence, self-esteem and self-control, and a positive disposition to learning, then they are equipped to learn anything that is required, including participating in large groups and compulsory work.

### Minimal challenging behaviour

Giving children the time and autonomy to choose learning they are interested in allows for calming of the nervous system and less behaviour that may challenge us. Barb O’Neill talks about label the feeling, here to help, and co-regulation, which can all be achieved through play as educators can respond appropriately at the time. Barb recommends singing and dancing (again readily available during free play) which helps you get in tune with each other, aids security and helps with regulation. It is the same when we imitate children’s play, getting in tune with the child, and therefore helping with the most challenging behaviour.

Trauma: After listening and conversing with Beth Macgregor I gained much insight into trauma-informed practise and how play can be beneficial. She says, “let’s be curious about behaviour”, and investigate why that behaviour is occurring. Look for the source of the stress, help calm the fear and the anger decreases. She says it is necessary for children to develop social and emotional skills before cognitive and academics can thrive. Beth also discussed the benefits of the “2 down, 1 up” rule to allow for accessibility and connection with children during the play period. We have implemented the rule of two educators sitting to one moving around, to prioritise connections, make ourselves available, and help children feel safe and secure by being seen and heard.

# Conclusion

Creating opportunities for children to discover the world around them through long, uninterrupted periods of play is central to young children’s wellbeing and healthy development. The Early Years Learning Framework states, “a strong sense of wellbeing provides all children with confidence and optimism which maximise their learning potential.” (EYLF V2.0 2020, p. 44).

In our preschool room, we have implemented changes in our routine to allow for: flow with longer play periods, child agency to be able to make decisions affecting them, and self-efficacy through progressive meals and non-compulsory small groups. We have already seen benefits with a shift in increased involvement and confidence, and less behaviour that we find challenging. Parents feedback from scholarship discussion was affirmative, with parents acknowledging findings and supporting changes.

This scholarship has reinforced my pedagogy on the importance of play and increased my understanding of how essential it is for children’s wellbeing. As Peter Gray writes, “In the absence of concern about failure and others’ judgments, children at play can devote all their attention to the skills at which they are playing. They strive to perform well, because performing well is an intrinsic goal of play, but they know that if they fail there will be no serious, real-world consequence.” (Gray 2013, p.154).

Essential dispositions for children growing up today include flexibility, curiosity, perseverance, creative and innovative thinking, imagination, adaptability, and problem-solving capacity. These all develop through the creative thought processes and are all developed when we allow for long, uninterrupted periods of play.

When you are passionate about something you love, you are intrinsically motivated to learn. Extended periods of play provide children time to follow an interest, an area of love and enjoyment, the time to be involved in flow, and to develop positive wellbeing. In turn, positive wellbeing gives children the strength and confidence for life ahead.

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ONLINE COURSES, WEBINARS, SEMINARS AND PODCAST

KU Children’s Services 2023 Power of Play webinar

MacGregor, B 2023 Early Childhood Trauma: Impact and Solutions Seminar

O’Neill, B 2023 Transforming Challenging Behavior Club, Los Angeles, USA

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Phoenix, S The Online Teacher’s and Educator’s Symposium (TOTES), Phoenix Support for Educators

Pica, R 2023 Virginia, USA, zoom call

Ritson, L 2020 Wearthy Podcast, Poly Studios

Sharpe, S 2023 Be You Consultant, zoom call

Wallis, N 2023 Parent and Educator Seminars, Griffith