

# Play-based learning and intentionality in the preschool

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is the only approved learning framework used to inform curriculum decision making in public preschools. Rather than using the term explicit, the EYLF directs teachers and educators to act with intentionality – to be deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and actions across all aspects of the curriculum (EYLF 2022).

## What is play-based learning and intentionality?

Play-based learning and intentionality is an evidence-based practice, fundamental to early childhood pedagogy and effective curriculum decision making. Play-based learning and intentionality:



reflects contemporary understandings of both child and educator intentionality and their roles in play, teaching, and learning



clarifies the expectation that preschool teachers and educators are intentional in all aspects of their practice.

Play-based learning and intentionality requires educators to be purposeful, thoughtful and strategic in how they plan for and promote child-initiated play.

## What is it not?

Play-based learning and intentionality does not involve:



a pre-determined curriculum focussed on instructing children on what to do and how to do it or teaching knowledge components in a sequential manner



the teacher taking a central role in leading learning experiences with minimal interaction or input from children



an instructional approach that prioritises direct instruction and structured activities over child-directed, open-ended play. Direct instruction and structured activities continue to be a feature of preschool programs; however, they are not the primary approach.

## Implementing a play-based learning and intentionality approach

When early childhood educators use their professional knowledge to make decisions about children's play, they are making pedagogical choices. Skilled, responsive and intentional educators are best placed to influence, promote and protect play in the life of every child ([Early Childhood Australia 2023](#)).

Play-based learning and intentionality recognises the intentional roles that both children and educators take in children's learning.

**Children's intentionality** is demonstrated when they make decisions. Neural pathways and connections in the brain are stimulated when children are fully engaged in their play as they make plans, create characters, solve problems, develop self-awareness and learn how to socialise, negotiate and think with others.

**Educators are intentional** in all aspects of the curriculum when they act deliberately, thoughtfully and purposefully to support children's learning through play. They recognise that learning occurs in social contexts and that joint attention, interactions, conversations and shared thinking are vitally important for learning ([EYLF 2022:21](#)).

When acting with intentionality, preschool teachers and educators consider the use of adult intervention. Intentionality is often focused on planned, structured experiences that hold a clear purpose. However, intentionality also refers to observing children's spontaneous play and providing scaffolding and support to strengthen the learning that occurs.

Intentionality does not always mean active educator intervention in a play experience: it can also relate to acting with intention by choosing to enhance children's play, rather than interrupting it ([Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority 2024](#)).

Figure 1 – implementing a play-based learning and intentionality approach

Play-based learning provides opportunities for children to learn as they discover, create and imagine.

Play-based learning with intentionality has the power to expand children's thinking.

When children act intentionally in play, they are stimulated to fully engage.

When educators act with intention, they are supporting children's learning through play.

## Strategies to promote children's learning, development and wellbeing

Age-appropriate, intentional teaching encompasses a wide range of activities, such as designing learning environments, selecting materials, and implementing instructional strategies that align across all 5 of the EYLF learning outcomes.

**Scaffolding:** informed by evidence of what children know, can do and understand, educators break learning into pieces that children can gradually master, temporarily providing guidance while they build independence.

**Questioning:** to enhance children's play and promote deep thinking, educators use thoughtful questions that build on what children know and do, while provoking them to wonder and explore new ideas.

**Modelling:** by incorporating modelling, preschool educators can demonstrate new skills and strategies in ways that children can copy and build on, while talking about what the educator is doing.

**Co-constructing:** learning takes place as children interact with educators and other children as they work together in partnership ([EYLF 2022:65](#)). Preschool educators can be a learner alongside the children, explore new ideas or skills together and share their learning and reflection.

**Shared sustained thinking:** when 2 or more individuals – adults or children – work together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept or evaluate activities ([EYLF 2022:68](#)). Preschool educators can use open ended questions, follow children's lead, model curiosity, and encourage reflection to foster self-awareness. Preschool educators may also create opportunities for group discussion to engage children in collaborative problem solving and celebrate diverse thinking.

**Environments:** indoor and outdoor environments support all aspects of children's learning and promote opportunities for sustained shared thinking and collaborative learning ([EYLF 2022:23](#)). Preschool educators plan intentional, well-designed, rich learning environments to capture children's interest and motivate them to engage in active participation and exploration. Environments may also include information about learning intentions and reference the principles, practices and outcomes of the EYLF to support educators' intentionality.

## Supporting continuity of learning

Continuity of learning occurs when learning builds upon prior learning, through age-appropriate experiences and pedagogy. This is strengthened when early childhood teachers and educators and primary teachers understand what and how children learn in both settings.

Together the EYLF and NSW syllabuses form an education continuum, guiding children's learning from early childhood into school.

When school leaders and teachers know children's strengths and interests and the preschool learning environments they have come from, they can provide opportunities that enable children feel comfortable and successful. Teachers can use this knowledge to provide learning opportunities and experiences that are familiar and reflective of the student's early learning environments.

### References and further reading

Australian Government Department of Education (AGDE) (2022). [Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia \(V2.0\)](#)

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) (2023). Information sheet [Play-based learning and intentionality](#)

ACECQA (2024) We hear you [Intentionality through the physical environment](#)

Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) (2023) Practice resource for ECEC [Play based learning and intentionality practice resource](#)

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) (2023) [Statement on Play](#)