

Section Three

Learning & Developing Through Play

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What is Play?

Play definition

Play is an essential part of every child's life and vital to the processes of human development. It provides the mechanism for children to explore the world around them and the medium through which skills are developed and practised. It is essential for physical, emotional and spiritual growth, intellectual and educational development, and acquiring social and behavioural skills.

Play is a generic term for a variety of activities which are satisfying to the child, creative for the child and may be freely chosen by the child. The activities may involve equipment or they may not, be boisterous and energetic or quiet and contemplative, be performed in a group or on one's own, have an end product or not or be light hearted or very serious.

Every child needs to play and has a right to play, but opportunities to play are often limited by external factors – discrimination, the effects of disability and special needs, insufficient space and other environmental factors, poverty and other social conditions. Play services are the means by which new opportunities for play are created.

“National Voluntary Council for Children's Play”

Play based learning

Play is a process

Young children's development is enhanced by 'doing'. It's the doing that matters to a child and contributes to his or her learning. It is not the product to take home that is important. For example, playing in the sandpit may involve feeling different textures and mixing water to make sand stick together. As children sift, dig, pour and carry they learn how to use their bodies. Both fine and gross motor skills are being used.

Decorating a sand castle with a collage of shells, stones, leaves, flowers and gumnuts enables children to learn about different concepts such as problem solving, counting, putting things in order and sorting.

Play is for everyone

It is the right of each child to have an equal opportunity to join in play at playgroup free from discrimination on the grounds of disability, culture, special needs, poverty, gender, social or environmental restraints.

Play needs space

Play spaces that facilitate learning and skill development are safe, offer opportunities for creativity, are age and stage appropriate, and are appealing and welcoming to the child. Give children freedom to move in an area that is not overcrowded with other children, nor cluttered with toys and equipment.

Play takes time

Set aside as much time as possible for play. This allows children to progress through stages of sensory exploration, constructive and creative use of materials. Don't rush children from activity to activity. Be flexible with your playgroup program.

Play involves taking risks

Small children learn by imitating their peers and older children. Each new skill is gained by trying something new and taking a risk. Keep a balance between safety and risk-taking at playgroup.

What is play based on for each child

Interest

Observe your child at playgroup and see which activities they most frequently enjoy. Be sure your child's interests are met. Repeat their favourite activity often to help them extend their concentration, knowledge and skills.

Free choice

Let children play independently to choose what they prefer to do, to challenge themselves and be creative. At playgroup the role of the adult is to provide a range of play experiences, then support the child's choice by being nearby, offering practical and verbal help if needed.

Self-determination

Allow each child to set the direction and pace of their own play with minimal adult guidance or assistance. Play builds self esteem and is satisfying, pleasurable and good fun.

Open-ended Play

What is open-ended play?

Open-ended, free or unstructured play has no:

- predetermined result
- pressure to finish or complete something to an adult standard
- model to copy
- steps to follow.

Children are free to think creatively and get satisfaction from doing things their own way and using their own ideas. They decide how to start, what direction to take, how to solve problems along the way and when they are finished.

Open-ended play is about exploring, experimenting, discovering and creating.

Play in itself is not specifically goal orientated. If adults concentrate on teaching and aim for an end product, play is robbed of its life and freedom.

Adults can help by providing lots of opportunities and uninterrupted time for this type of play.

At playgroup open-ended play materials include: paint, playdough, clay, blocks, construction sets, balls, home corner, dress-ups, wheeled toys, boxes, sand and water play.

Open-ended art and craft activities give children the opportunity to explore and experiment with the mediums of their own choice. They can be imaginative and innovative and create a unique piece of work and says, "I did it all by myself".

Develop creatively

You don't have to come up with new craft ideas every week at playgroup. Children love repetition. They acquire and develop skills through continual practise. Adults help maintain interest in open-ended activities by making slight variations such as setting up in different ways, sometimes inside, sometimes outside. Set up on a table top, on the floor or on a blanket under a tree.

Change colour, recipes, shapes and textures to create new interest. Mix and match activities like making a tunnel from a large box to push or ride wheeled toys through. Add a different piece of play equipment, such as some bats to the balls or teapots to the home corner.

Develop the mind

Using an open-ended approach helps to develop an enquiring mind that is able to solve problems and negotiate with others. Ask open-ended questions that are thought-provoking and can't be answered with a yes or no, such as "What would happen if...?", "How do you think you can fix this?", "How do the clouds stay in the sky?", "Which one do you like better?", or "Why is that?"

Accept answers without judgement. This encourages the child to share their thoughts, ideas and opinions without fear of judgement and being wrong.

This type of question and response:

- focuses on what the child is doing
- encourages children to think and respond
- values their opinions and ideas
- develops language skills
- develops imagination and a sense of wonder
- develops sequential thinking and problem solving skills.

Setting up open-ended play

While open-ended play is spontaneous it takes careful thought and planning to be effective. To encourage open-ended play:

- observe children in order to understand their interests and abilities
- put out appropriate open-ended play equipment that invites children to play
- give freedom to children to choose and set the direction of their own play
- be flexible with the program to allow children time to develop their play
- be available with ideas and resources that will extend the play.

Childhood has its own way of seeing, thinking and feeling, and nothing is more foolish than to try to substitute ours for theirs.

"Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile"

Indoor Play

Setting the scene

Setting up your playgroup room requires special consideration as babies and young children are at different ages and stages of development. All children need to be able to freely move around a play room and confidently play in a hazard and danger free environment.

Ask parents to dress their children for play; inappropriate clothing may limit their ability to be fully involved in the play.

Setting up carefully will affect how children play and can help minimise accidents and conflict.

The playgroup environment will need to be attractive and interesting to children, with plenty of opportunities for them to explore, experiment, develop their ideas and be creative.

As each child finishes an activity, the supervising adult will need to be ready to reorganise the space to make it ready for the next child.

Things to set up

- Simple experiences at children's level
- Several open-ended play experiences such as dough, clay, painting, collage, drawing and pretend play
- Opportunities for children to experiment, explore and use situations and materials their own way
- Ample materials, play spaces and choices for each child eg if there are four chairs at a playdough table, you will need four lumps of dough, four rolling pins and four sets of cutters
- A special, safe, play space on the floor for babies
- Chairs or cushions on the floor for adults to sit on when they supervise or play with children
- Furniture or partitions so there are no long corridors that invite running indoors
- Separated, defined play areas where possible
- Play that creates a mess in an area that can be easily washed down or on a large tarpaulin, spread out to protect the floor. Have smocks, hand towels and water available.
- Busy and quiet areas where children can play alone or in groups

Things to avoid

- Tricycles or similar equipment indoors which may disrupt other children's play or harm small children
- Clutter caused by too many toys and choices that over-stimulate or confuse children
- Insufficient materials-sharing and waiting breaks the flow of play and can lead to frustration and disinterest
- Background music that increases noise levels and can distract and overstimulate children
- Play that requires hours of preparation or a tiring clean up for adults

Other considerations

- Involve children in choosing and setting up activities.
- Plan activities for fun.
- Allow uninterrupted time for play.
- Include all children irrespective of age or abilities.
- Develop each child's interests.
- Cater for each child's developmental stage.
- Supervise children for safety and fair play.
- Be culturally relevant to all families in your playgroup.
- Treat boys and girls equally.
- Discourage competition.
- Encourage exploration and experimentation.
- Have reasonable expectations about tidiness and mess.
- Plan simple, enjoyable sessions.

Things to include for adults

- Time to play with their child
- Time for adult socialising and conversation
- Opportunities to share and contribute
- Times to discuss and make decisions about the play program

Outdoor Play

Natural play spaces give children the opportunity to experience seasonal changes, to feel, touch, smell and hear natural elements and interact with them. Help children to appreciate and take responsibility for their natural environment.

Most, if not all play, can be either indoors or outdoors.

Traditional indoor play activities such as puzzles, playdough or drawing can be enjoyed outdoors and with a little planning, sand, water and ball play can be fun indoors.

When creating outdoor play spaces for children at playgroup the principles are similar to the previously discussed 'Indoor Play'. Also consider:

- playground safety and security
- being dressed for the weather
- individual interests and abilities
- giving children freedom to create their own play with sand, water, cubbies, balls, wheeled toys, large cardboard boxes
- opportunities for physical exercises like running, climbing, lifting, carrying, balancing.

Establishing an outdoor play area

Spaces for play

Planning effective and efficient outdoor play spaces adds to the quality and variety of outdoor play. Set spaces that provide for:

- challenging activities such as balancing, climbing, tunnelling, swinging
- running, ball games, chasing bubbles, pushing or pulling, spinning or riding wheeled toys
- sensory play with sand, mud, water, pebbles, stones, plants and flowers
- hiding away, high observation places, cubby house building, picnic places
- meandering, observing, watching a snail, ants or a butterfly
- a small bench for being alone or with a friend
- meeting as a group for songs or a story
- pretend work such as building dams, washing

- clothes, building roads
- imaginative play with dolls, jungle animals, insects, blocks.

Safety

See 'Hunt for Hazards' and 'Control Hazards' sections. Ask the owners of your playgroup buildings to remove any leftover building materials that may be in the play area, or arrange a working bee to keep lawns short. Clear away any rubbish that may attract snakes, spiders or wasps.

Fencing

Enclose the entire outdoor area with fencing that children cannot climb over, go through or get under. Have a self-closing, self-locking, childproof gate.

Storage

Some outdoor equipment is large and may need to be stored in a shed. It is a good idea when installing a cubby house or fort to include a storage area underneath for bikes, tricycles and wheeled toys.

Shade

If there are no naturally shaded areas, hang tarpaulins or install shade-cloth over areas where children frequently play. See 'SunSmart' section.

Sheltered area

A pergola with a roof, attached to an outdoor wall, gives children a place to play outdoors even when it is raining. It makes a great area for painting and other activities that make a mess.

Fixed equipment

If you choose to install fixed equipment such as swings, slides, forts, cubby houses or climbing bars, first check the Australian Standards for playground equipment. Have the right soft fall material under each piece of equipment. See 'Soft fall under surfacing' section.

Weigh up the benefits of installing fixed equipment against the cost of buying smaller movable pieces that can be used both indoors and outdoors.

Fixed equipment is often very expensive and seldom used. If your playground has fixed or unsuitable equipment then change the way it is used by adding blankets, boxes, wooden cable reels or other attachable items.

Outdoor Play

Sandpit

Playing in the sandpit is the most popular outdoor experience at playgroup. Build a sandpit in a well-drained position that has sun and rain to sterilise the sand. Cover the sand with shade-cloth or other porous material when not in use to prevent animals, particularly cats, fouling it.

Natural areas

Remove any poisonous or highly allergenic plants. Develop a garden by planting flowers or vegetables. Partition off a small area for a digging patch and add water for mud play. Have a bird bath and observe nature's visitors.

Bike path

A safe, circular bike path or defined wheeled toy area will prevent wheeled play interfering with other children's outdoor exploration.

Be safe outdoors. See 'Playground safety' section.

Social play

Some parents worry because their child doesn't play with other children. Play in a social context progresses as the child grows, develops and becomes familiar with routines, expectations and the people around them. Some children learn by standing apart and watching other children play.

All children progress through the following stages of playing:

- alone, absorbed in what they are doing
- alongside one another without interacting
- together at the same activity but each playing their own way, with little organisation or group goals
- cooperatively with other children in a more complex, organised way with common goals and rules and perhaps one or two children directing the play.

Play and the Home Environment

From birth, babies play and use all of their developing senses to explore their new world and they do most of this at home with family.

Playgroup SA recognises and highly values parents as children's first and most enduring educators and the crucial role the home environment plays in providing early play experiences.

There is a growing awareness that the importance of unstructured free play experiences in early childhood are linked to a child's optimal physical, emotional, social and cognitive development.

In the midst of this growing public awareness comes compelling new scientific evidence about play – evidence that play “sculpts” the brain in unique ways – play not only promotes optimal development, but also builds resilience and reduces stress.

Jane Hewes Early Childhood Chair,
MacEwan College, Edmonton, Canada

At playgroup

- Watch what your child enjoys and include this in their home play.
- Buy gifts for your child to extend their favourite playgroup play experiences.
- Observe which learning style your child prefers and build this into daily and family routines.

At home

- Set up a special play space at home, indoors and outdoors.
- Rotate toys and equipment according to your child's current interests.
- Give your child plenty of time to play alone, with friends and with family.
- Invite playgroup friends home to play.
- Encourage your child to repeat and practise new skills they learn at playgroup.
- Take time to chat about what happened at playgroup and ask thought-provoking questions.
- Reinforce at home what your child is learning at playgroup about safety, healthy foods, healthy choices and being SunSmart.
- Regularly make time to have fun playing as a family. Read books, sing and dance to favourite music, tell stories, go on a train ride, visit the beach, zoo or wildlife sanctuary.
- Use travel time to sing playgroup songs, re-tell stories or play simple games like spot the taxi, bus, etc.

In your community

Find out what's happening in your local community. Visit your council's website and look for children's and family services or phone and ask. Join the local library, toy library or visit local parks and other places of interest. Look for information about local festivals in local papers or on community noticeboards.

For more information

- Read the Playgroup SA print magazine, State of Play, produced in partnership with SA Kids
- Subscribe to ePlay News, Playgroup SA's electronic newsletter for Members and Coordinators
- Visit your Local Council or Children's Centre website for a schedule of activities
- www.parentingplayground.org.au
- www.kidsaroundtown.com.au
- www.playandgo.com.au
- www.sakids.com.au

Baby Play

From the time a baby is born everything they see, touch and do arouses curiosity and a desire to learn.

Playgroups support this learning. Babies love being part of the busyness at playgroup and are often mesmerised by watching and interacting with other children. New babies are best left safely in a pram or held by their parent.

Older babies will busily examine everything around them, learning through seeing, touching, tasting, feeling and hearing. They explore and experiment to discover new information. New skills are mastered through practise and repetition.

At playgroup, you can help by understanding the way babies learn and provide a variety of play experiences.

Create a safe place for babies to play in your playgroup room, out of the main traffic flow. Put a large rug on the floor or on the grass outside and add some baby toys.

Popular baby toys

- Soft blocks or balls
- Rattles
- Activity centres
- Safety mirrors
- Mobiles
- Commercial or homemade baby mats
- Prams, cots or 'A' frame baby gyms
- Soft toys
- Bead frames
- Books
- Containers or plasticware
- Toys in a box, bag or basket for older babies to unpack and pack
- The above-mentioned

Safety

When offering toys to a baby, avoid:

- anything sharp or broken
- anything smaller than a film canister
- detachable or small parts, like buttons and eyes
- cords longer than 30cm
- toxic paints or plastics.

Quiet play

Play is not always busy; it can be restful and soothing. Quiet reflective play is as important to your child's wellbeing as times of social and physically active play.

Give babies time to lie on their backs to stretch, kick and develop hand skills or on their tummy to strengthen back, neck, shoulder and arm muscles and to practise head control.

If a baby becomes unsettled at playgroup the parent can share a book, sing lullabies or take the baby to where children are playing.

Music

Gather a few babies and parents together and sing or chant simple nursery rhymes like Humpty Dumpty. Add finger movements as you sing Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star or put actions to Row, Row, Row Your Boat. Play games like Peek-a-Boo or touching games such as Round and Round the Garden. Play different styles of music. Place shakers, rattles and musical toys with the baby toys.

Babies are active learners

Their toy play develops through the following stages:

- watching objects
- following moving objects with their eyes
- reaching out
- taking hold of an object
- examining it with eyes and hands
- squeezing and patting with hands
- passing the toy from hand to hand
- putting it to their mouth to explore it by sucking, biting or chewing
- dropping it to watch it fall
- banging toys together.

It is not necessary to buy expensive toys. Put together a container of safe, colourful objects from around the home. You could even try making things for babies to play with.

Toys and Equipment

Basic toys and play equipment for playgroups

- A variety of balls and small bats
- Interlocking or wooden blocks and/or construction sets (at least 20 large pieces)
- Washable dolls, doll's bed and bedding
- Baby toys, rattles, soft toys, washable or cardboard books
- Large crayons, paste and paint brushes, non-spill paint pots, blunt-ended scissors
- Puzzles
- Sets of animals, cars, trains, musical instruments, tea sets, cooking sets
- Buckets, spades, scoops, dump trucks and graders for the sandpit or digging patch
- Push or pedal-wheeled toys such as tricycles, walker wagons, pull-along toys, dolls' prams, wheelbarrows
- Floor rugs, play mats
- Tarpaulins or sheets of strong plastic to protect floor from messy play activities
- Storage boxes
- Furniture for small children

Ten questions to ask when choosing toys for playgroup

1. Will it withstand constant, heavy use?
2. Is it safe for all children or will it need to be used in a restricted area?
3. Can it be easily cleaned?
4. Is it linked to the children's abilities?
5. Does it encourage social interaction or is it used individually?
6. Is it simple and able to be used by children of different ages?
7. Does it give the opportunity to develop and practise new skills?
8. Does it have scope for imagination and experimentation?
9. Is it in line with the interests of this group of children?
10. What is its value – does it entertain, encourage physical play, foster creativity or is it a tool for imaginative play?

Take into account individual differences. The aptitude, personality and interests of a child will determine which toys he or she prefers. Toys that fascinate one child may be of no interest to another.

Recycled materials for play

- Cartons and boxes become building blocks, cubbies, cars, boats, a doll's bassinet, containers for packing and emptying, tunnels for crawling through or a surface for painting
- Plastic drink containers can be used for filling and emptying with water or sand, shakers for music or cut down to make funnels and scoops
- Ice-cream container lids can be used for stencils
- Coloured lids can be sorted or threaded into a baby's rattle
- Tyres (not steel belted) can be stacked, rolled, cut in half for water or sand play or used as a swing or in an obstacle course
- Paper off-cuts or old posters can be used for tearing, drawing, painting, cutting and pasting
- Dresses, skirts, shirts, ties, waistcoats, cameras, bags, belts, scarves are ideal for dress ups for pretend and role play
- Cardboard cylinders are perfect for telescopes or flutes.

Parent's Role in Play

Parents and play

Children laugh as a dad plays rough and tumble with some toddlers. A few parents exchange ideas over a cup of coffee. A grandmother cuddles a baby as she points to the pictures in a book. A young mum pushes her child on a swing. These are common scenes at playgroup.

Closer observation will show that the role of adults in children's play falls into five distinct styles.

1. The Planner

This adult observes the child at play and determines their interests and abilities. They plan intentional play experiences to support and extend the child's holistic development based on the child's preferences, values and abilities. Every opportunity is taken to involve the child in the planning process.

2. The Director

This adult organises the play and directs the child. They will take the child to the activity, show the child how and what to do and stay close by to monitor the child's progress.

3. The Facilitator

This adult centres their attention more on the child than on the play. The child is encouraged to choose the activity and play independently while the adult stands back without getting involved. The adult is an encouraging and supportive resource person who attends to requests for assistance from the child.

4. The Partner

This adult plays with the child as an equal, sharing the role of initiating and choosing the play direction. The adult and child negotiate about ideas and leadership. The adult becomes a playmate in the real sense, neither dominating nor encouraging, but actively joining in the play.

5. The Observer

This adult gives the child freedom to play alone with little or no interaction. The adult allows time and space for the child to play independently. Children create their own play opportunities and socialise freely with other children and adults.

A balanced mix of the five styles in a playgroup session is ideal. Each style has its advantages and disadvantages.

Plan time for adults to chat and enjoy friendships. This is an important part of the playgroup experience. Playgroups are not just about children's play.

Supervision

Make sure that when a family starts at your playgroup that they understand they are responsible for supervising each child they bring. It is not the responsibility of the coordinator or session leader. Supervision at playgroup is about duty of care, behaviour guidance, safety and fair play that is fun for everyone.

Inappropriate behaviour that hurts other people or disrupts another child's play needs to be handled by the parent or caregiver so that the child learns to interact within acceptable limits.

At the most basic level, supervision contributes to protecting children from hazards, however adequate supervision occurs when each child is being observed constantly, actively and diligently by the adults at playgroup.

As adults supervise they observe their child and learn how their child plays and relates in a group setting. By being on hand they are available to guide and support their child's play.

Essentials of supervision

Be sure everyone understands that no baby, child or group of children may be left unsupervised in a car, room or outdoors.

Children must be taken, not sent, to the bathroom. Potential danger areas such as the kitchen, storeroom or offices need barriers to keep children safe.

When a parent or caregiver is on rostered duty they need to make arrangements with another playgroup member to supervise their child.

Children who are in danger or in conflict need to be removed from the situation by the nearest adult and taken to their parent or caregiver.

Adapt the level of supervision to the circumstance. When there is potential danger such as swings, water play, scissors or climbing equipment, the adult's full attention is necessary. Visual contact and being close by may be adequate in the home corner or sandpit.

Recipes

Here are some favourite playgroup recipes for you to try using readily available, inexpensive ingredients.

IMPORTANT:

Before using these recipes at playgroup, check with parents and carers for any children attending that may have egg or gluten allergies.

Flour recipes

When making playdough use Edicol dye for colouring or leave it uncoloured. Make it at playgroup so the children can use it warm – lovely! Try different flours or add sand for a new texture.

Easy playdough

2 cups plain flour
1 cup salt
2 tablespoons Cream of Tartar
2 tablespoons oil
2 cups water
¼ teaspoon Edicol colour (optional)

Mix ingredients and cook on stovetop gently, stirring constantly until thick. Allow to cool and knead until smooth. Store in an airtight container.

Because of its high salt content, this recipe is not recommended for small children who may eat playdough.

Microwave playdough

2 cups plain flour
1 cup salt
2 tablespoons Cream of Tartar
1 tablespoon oil
2 cups water
¼ teaspoon Edicol colour (optional)

Mix all ingredients together in a large microwave dish. Cook for three minutes on high then stir and cook for a further 2½ -3½ minutes. Form into a ball and leave to cool for five minutes.

Stretchy playdough

Use the following recipe to make as large or small an amount as you want. It is great fun to make with the children at playgroup.

Use any measure eg container, cup, lid or spoon
2½ measures self raising flour
1 measure cold water

Mix flour and water together to make lovely stretchy dough. Add more flour if necessary. Colour with Edicol if you wish. For other sensory experiences add spice or essence.

Playgroup cakes (edible)

Give each child a spoon, margarine tub and patty pan case with their name underneath.

Preheat oven to 375°F / 180°C

Add to margarine tubs:

1 tablespoon self raising flour
1 teaspoon sugar
1 teaspoon soft margarine or butter
1 tablespoon pre-made milk and egg mixture (for 12 cakes add one egg to 150mls milk)

Mix all ingredients and place in each child's patty pan with their name written underneath.

Bake 10-15 minutes.

Recipes

Cornflour

Salt free gloop (uncooked)

375g cornflour
1 cup cold water

Place cornflour in a bowl and add water until it is the consistency of thick dough.

It is easy and fun to mix with your hands and brushes off clothes when dry.

Glue and paint

3 heaped tablespoons cornflour
3 tablespoons cold water to mix
500ml boiling water

OR

Use any measure, eg container, cup, lid or spoon

1 measure cornflour
1 measure cold water to mix
3 measures boiling water to thicken

In a measuring jug, mix cornflour with enough water to be just runny. Quickly add boiling water to the mixture to make 500ml - stirring briskly until thick and smooth.

This can be used as a clear clag or add a teaspoon of Edicol for either a bright coloured glue or thick finger paint. Thin the coloured glue with a little water for painting with brushes.

Soap mixtures

Bubble pipe

1 drinking straw
1 plastic lid from a 2 litre milk or juice container
1 small square of towelling
1 elastic band

Burn a hole in the side of the lid with a hot skewer. Insert straw, cover open end with a towelling square and attach the elastic band.

Bubble mixture

Add one teaspoon Morning Fresh liquid detergent to one cup of warm water. Thoroughly soak bubble pipe in mixture, remove and blow through straw.

Note: As a health precaution do not share bubble pipes. Make one for each child.

Lux slime/finger painting

This mixture will keep for many months in a plastic container.

The night before, dissolve 1 cup Lux Flakes in 3 cups boiling water and stir until clear. Leave overnight.

Next morning, the mixture will have a jelly like consistency. Whisk small amounts as needed.

Or, whisk thoroughly using an electric mixer for about five minutes until it has doubled in volume. Use as finger paint on a laminated tabletop or on paper. Colour if you wish with ¼ teaspoon of Edicol dye.

Allergy warning

Edicol dye is a strong powder dye available from art or educational equipment suppliers. It washes out in cold water. If your child is sensitive to food additives please exercise care. The following colourings are included in Edicol dyes: Yellow (102), Red (110,124), Blue (132), Green (102,133), Black (133,123,102), Brown (155,133), Orange (110).

This information is listed on the containers so that if you are aware of a particular intolerance you can avoid that colour.

Checklist

Is your weekly play program appropriate for the ages and stages of each child, offering activities that support children's learning and development? Let this checklist help you to assess your play program.

- Play is planned to reflect the playgroup's philosophy and goals.
- The playgroup program encourages children and adults to socialise.
- Children are given the opportunity to make choices and take on new challenges.
- Parents/caregivers talk about the play program and evaluate it together.
- There are ample opportunities for children to repeat and practise skills.
- Children are encouraged to interact with nature and natural materials in a respectful way.
- The play program is balanced and developmentally appropriate.
- Play experiences are planned to reflect children's needs, abilities and interests.
- Play encourages fine and gross motor skill development.
- Play encourages creative development and aesthetic awareness.
- Play provides individual and group experiences.
- Play encourages intellectual development and language development.
- Music is regularly included in the play program.
- Adequate time is given for open-ended play.
- Babies are well catered for.
- Toys are regularly cleaned and checked for safety and dress-ups are washed regularly.
- Recycled materials are used where possible.
- The storage area is well labelled and well maintained.
- Competition between children or adults is discouraged and children are supported in play by their parent/caregiver.
- Plenty of time is given to child-directed play.
- Children are given opportunities to explore and experiment with various media eg sand, water, playdough, toys with regular and irregular shapes, sounds and effects.
- The program is flexible and allows extra time to continue activities that are engaging children.
- Parents/caregivers are encouraged to dress their children appropriately.
- Home play activities reflect the cultures of families in playgroup.
- All children are able to participate in play.
- A fair play culture exists where no child or adult is able to disrupt another child's play.
- Children are assisted to develop their skills, join in, share and take turns.