

**YOUNG CHILDREN'S  
CHOICES AND DECISIONS  
IN FREE PLAY - FREE CHOICE TIME**

Dr Elizabeth Wood  
Professor of Education  
University of Exeter

[e.a.wood@ex.ac.uk](mailto:e.a.wood@ex.ac.uk)

## **The free choice – free play agenda**

- Choice of activities, materials, resources
- Indoor and outdoor learning environments
- Choice of modes of communication and representation
- Choice of play activities – who to play with, what to play at, what to play with, where to play, how to play

## Defining characteristics – play is:

- child-chosen and child-invented
- pretend, but done AS IF the activity were real
- focuses on the doing (process not product, but children may choose to create a product)
- done by the players, not by the adults
- active involvement and engagement (bodies, emotions, minds)
- free from imposed rules, but may be organised by children's rules
- about children's meanings and intentions
- fun

There should be opportunities for children to follow their own interests and ideas through free play.

Children's learning is most effective when it arises from first-hand experiences, whether spontaneous or structured, and when they are given time to play without interruptions and to reach a satisfactory conclusion.

DCELLS (2008) Play/Active Learning Overview for 3-7 year olds. (Wales Foundation Phase)

Meeting the individual needs of the child...planning for personalised learning, development and care...planning for equity and diversity.

Adult-child involvement...extending and challenging children's thinking...

*EYFS Practice Guidance, DfES, 2007*

**Individual or social model?**

There is inadequate recognition of dimensions of difference in free choice/play - age, gender, ethnicity, social class, ability/disability, sexualities.

Child development theories do not adequately encompass dimensions of difference.

Provision can be tokenistic.

Post-developmental theories provide a more critical analysis of power relations in free choice/play, and the ways in which these reveal dimensions of difference.

Youngest learners have the most freedom to access the curriculum through 'free choice'.

Play is not always the best or most appropriate means for learning for all children.

Play is used as an 'umbrella term' to encompass a wide range of activities.

Play is one of *many means* for learning in early childhood.

Home-based child-rearing practices may not be consistent with the western free choice-free play agenda.

Children's activities are often highly fluid, especially in role play.

Children move in and out of different modes of play – solitary, co-operative, highly social.

Children move in and out of play to set rules, organise events and dialogue, make props and resources.

Free play with peers is likely to include higher levels of social and symbolic complexity.



Truly free play can be ....

Chaotic, unpredictable, noisy, messy, anarchic, challenging to established rules and authority, revolutionary, exuberant, wild....

But there may also be order and pattern within the apparent chaos.

Repertoires of interest and participation:  
children's (or adults') interests and  
agendas ?

- Garden centres or pop idol ?
- Rough and tumble, war games and  
superhero play – banned or allowed?

## **Some provocations.....**

- Whose choices are privileged in EC settings?
- Which children are choosing which activities?
- In what ways are children's choices influenced by dimensions of difference?
- Who is being included/excluded in social play and free choice activities?
- Who is leading/following?

- Who is exercising power through the free choice/free play agenda?
- How do children determine their own power, agency and control?
- Does the free choice/free play agenda enable or constrain equality of access and opportunity?
- How can educators develop culturally situated knowledge about dimensions of difference?