

# Principals Want to Know

A tip sheet for principals that focuses on practical issues faced in schools.

Drawn from existing resources, these tips are designed to support instructional leadership practice.

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## Intentional, Play-Based Learning in Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK)

### The Question:

As an instructional leader, how can I support implementation of intentional, play-based learning among FDK educator team(s) and staff?

### The Answer:

There are five important elements to consider:

1. Understanding intentional, play-based learning;
2. Establishing an optimal early learning environment;
3. Supporting the FDK educator team;
4. Making learning visible;
5. Communicating with families and the community.

### 1. UNDERSTANDING INTENTIONAL, PLAY-BASED LEARNING

*It has long been acknowledged that there is a strong link between play and learning for young children, especially in the areas of problem solving, language acquisition, literacy, numeracy, and social, physical, and emotional skills.*

The Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program,  
(Draft 2010-2011)

Young children explore their environment and learn about their world through the process of play-based learning. Effective FDK classrooms use play to further children's learning and inspire a high level of engagement and curiosity in all areas of the program. Some features include:

- large blocks of time dedicated to intentional, play-based learning in the flow of the day;
- allowing children to be "in charge" of their play;
- hands-on, inquiry-based learning experiences that foster exploration, problem solving, discovery and dramatization;
- intentional planning of learning opportunities based on observation of children's development and interests;
- classroom materials that are meaningful, inclusive, open-ended and change over time to reflect the ideas



and questions children are exploring;

- opportunities for whole class, small group and individual learning;
- representing children's thinking and learning in diverse ways; and
- embedding literacy and numeracy experiences in play scenarios.

### 2. ESTABLISHING AN OPTIMAL EARLY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The effective use of time, space and materials is an important consideration in establishing optimal early-learning environments that foster purposeful play-based learning. School leaders can support this by:

- encouraging the use of all available space in the school and the outdoors as places for inquiry and learning;
- reviewing furniture needs and removing clutter to maximize space for children;
- aligning the purchase of classroom resources and materials with play-based, inquiry learning;
- promoting the use of natural materials from the environment;
- viewing the environment as a teacher with a deliberate design of learning areas;
- ensuring documentation reflects children engaged in play and display their learning and thinking;
- developing a clear understanding of the knowledge and skills in the program expectations to support

- observation and documentation during play;
- providing new technologies for capturing and documenting children's learning;
- organizing visits to other FDK classes that demonstrate effective use of space, time and materials;
- facilitating the sharing of resources among classes to optimize experiences for all children; and
- considering the flow of the day in FDK when developing the timetable for the school.

*Early childhood settings can help to change the daily lives of children and their families.*

Early Learning for Every Child Today, 2007

### 3. SUPPORTING THE FDK EDUCATOR TEAM

In a play-based early learning program, educators make thoughtful, intentional decisions by:

- planning for play throughout the day;
- choosing materials and organizing the learning environment to promote different forms of play;
- co-constructing learning with children, capitalizing on their interests and needs;
- guiding, shaping and engaging in play but not dictating or dominating it;
- asking questions that provoke further discussions, expand and enhance play;
- responding to, challenging or extending play; and
- observing and documenting the play.

School leaders can assist FDK educator team(s) by:

- revisiting possible intentional interactions outlined in *The Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program (Draft 2010-2011)*;
- facilitating opportunities for sharing of effective practices and classroom experiences through collaborative, professional learning conversations;
- providing ongoing information and professional learning opportunities (<http://www.curriculum.org/>, <http://community.elearningontario.ca/>);
- inviting board program or curriculum staff to clarify, support and provide guidance as required;
- building capacity with all staff regarding child-initiated, intentional play-based learning;
- using the rethink, repeat, remove framework to ignite change in practice;
- encouraging staff to take risks by trying one new element at a time until play-based learning is embedded in the daily program;
- modeling the tone and vision of FDK as a foundation to developing a collaborative learning environment; and
- helping to clarify the knowledge and skills in the program document, especially what it looks like when a child exhibits them during play.

### 4. MAKING LEARNING VISIBLE

Making children's learning visible supports curriculum planning based on the child's needs and interests in

addition to documenting the child's progress in achieving the learning expectations. Sample strategies include:

- use of learning stories;
- representations through different media such as drawing and dramatization;
- documentation panels with photos and/or scribed language;
- video clips and/or recordings of conversations and behaviours; and
- samples of children's work in student portfolios, such as authentic writing, artefacts, paintings, building projects.

### 5. COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILIES AND THE COMMUNITY

Communication is key to successful implementation of a play-based FDK program. Staff can effectively promote and communicate information about intentional play-based learning with parents, guardians and the community by:

- inviting parents and community members to visit and participate in FDK classes;
- organizing parent workshops or curriculum evenings that focus on play-based learning;
- hosting student-led portfolio conferences where children communicate their learning to families;
- talking with parents informally on the playground, in hallways or at other opportune times;
- using testimonials and feedback from parents to inform and enhance implementation of FDK;
- displaying documentation of children's learning throughout the school to ensure access to all visitors;
- ensuring open lines of communication using school websites, e-mail updates, translated newsletters; and
- using clear and concise wording in key messages to dispel misunderstanding of play-based learning.

Families are an integral—and visible—part of the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program who, working together with teachers and ECEs, can support and foster a positive learning environment at home and at school. Full-Day Early Learning Program for Four-and Five-Year Olds, A Reference Guide for Educators, 2010.

### REFERENCES

- Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning (2007). Early Learning for Every Child Today.
- Ontario Ministry of Education (2010). Full-Day Early Learning Program for Four-and Five-Year Olds, A Reference Guide for Educators. Ontario: Queen's Printer.
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