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FREE PLAY

Children are naturally motivated to play. Through play they develop motor, language, social-emotional, and thinking skills at the same time.
When children have enough time to play, their play becomes more complex, creative, and socially interactive. While play is not the only way children learn, it is an essential part of early development and learning.

THERE ARE FOUR TYPES OF PLAY IN EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMMES:

01 FREE PLAY

The child leads the play. They decide what to play, how to play, where to play, and who joins in.

02 CO-OPTED PLAY

The child leads the play, but the teacher occasionally joins in to extend learning by asking questions, making suggestions, or adding materials.

03 GUIDED PLAY

The teacher sets up specific play activities (e.g., dough, drawing, obstacle courses).

Children choose which activity to do and how to explore it.

04 PLAYFUL INSTRUCTION

The teacher leads a planned activity to teach a specific skill or concept e.g. a story activity that teaches listening and attention skills. The teacher decides the activity and guides the children, but it is done in a playful and engaging way so children enjoy participating and learning.

BENEFITS OF FREE PLAY FOR CHILDREN

BUILDS THINKING SKILLS
Children develop problem-solving, creativity, and flexible thinking.

STRENGTHENS EXECUTIVE FUNCTION
Free play supports working memory, self-regulation, and attention, skills needed for school success.

DEVELOPS SOCIAL SKILLS
Children learn to negotiate, collaborate, share, and resolve conflicts.

SUPPORTS EMOTIONAL WELLBEING
Play allows children to express feelings, act out experiences, and build resilience.

BUILDS INDEPENDENCE AND CONFIDENCE
When children make their own decisions in play, they develop confidence and independence.

ENCOURAGES HEALTHY MOVEMENT
Active free play supports physical development and coordination.

Scan the code to view a video on learning through play

Scan the code to view a video from Ntataise on free choice play

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POSITIVE DISCIPLINE

Positive discipline helps children learn the right behaviour instead of being punished for the wrong behaviour. It focuses on guiding children, setting clear boundaries, and helping them understand what to do differently next time.

Harsh discipline can harm children's confidence and relationships with adults. Practices such as shaming, physical punishment, withholding food, or long time-outs (more than 5 minutes) should be avoided, as they do not teach children how to manage their behaviour.

When teachers use calm and respectful discipline, children feel safe and understood. This builds trust, supports emotional development, and helps create a calmer classroom where children can learn and get along with others.

THE POSITIVE DISCIPLINE CHECKLIST

Adapted from NICRO 2024 Positive Parenting Handbook

Below is a self-assessment that can help teachers focus on using more positive discipline practices.

HOW TO USE THE CHECKLIST:

Read each statement and rate yourself from 1–5:
1 = Very rarely 5 = Always

Look at the statements where you scored 3 or lower. These show areas where you can strengthen your positive discipline practice.

Choose one or two areas to focus on and try to apply them more consistently.

Use the checklist again after a few weeks to reflect on your progress.

I focus on teaching and guiding the children to positive behaviour	
I explain the reasons behind the classroom rules, so children understand them	
I acknowledge and praise good behaviour	
I model the behaviour I want to see in the children	
I encourage the children to think of solutions to problems	
I encourage children to express their thoughts and feelings and acknowledge them	
I apply the rules and consequences consistently	
Children know what to expect if the rules are not followed	
I turn difficult situations into opportunities for learning	
I give age appropriate responsibilities to promote independence	
I prioritise teaching lessons through consequences rather than punishing children	

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POSITIVE INTERACTIONS

IN THE CLASSROOM

A positive emotional climate helps children feel safe, confident, and ready to learn. When teachers build warm relationships and clear expectations, children learn how to manage their behaviour, solve problems, and get along with others.

HOW TEACHERS CAN BUILD A POSITIVE CLASSROOM CLIMATE

BUILD WARM RELATIONSHIPS

- Greet each child by name when they arrive
- Talk with children about their interests
- Get down to the child's eye level and listen carefully
- Notice and respond quickly when a child is upset

SHOW WARMTH AND ENCOURAGEMENT

- Smile, use children's names, and give positive attention
- Praise effort and encourage children when they try
- Warmth can be shown through kind words, tone, and supportive gestures

CREATE CLEAR ROUTINES AND RULES

- Keep a consistent daily routine
- Use simple classroom rules
- Remind children of rules calmly and praise them when they follow them

ENCOURAGE RESPONSIBILITY

- Give children small classroom roles (serving snack, tidying up, watering plants)
- Encourage children to do things for themselves (e.g., put on their own shoes, doing their own buttons, pouring their own water).

SUPPORTING CHILDREN WHO ARE HAVING CHALLENGES

Some children may struggle to join play, manage emotions, or solve conflicts. Teachers can help by:

- Creating opportunities to play together (group projects, building together, pretend play)
- Inviting children into play "Come help us build a farmyard."
- Praising positive behaviour to build confidence
- Using puppets, persona dolls, and stories to talk about difficult situations and feelings

HELPING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND THEIR FEELINGS

The preschool years are an important time for children to learn to recognise and talk about their feelings, which helps them manage their behaviour and understand others. Teachers can support this by:

- Talking about feelings during daily conversations and stories
- Helping children name different emotions
- Encouraging children to express how they feel
- Using tools like emotion charts, while also expanding vocabulary beyond basic feelings

Scan the code to view a video on building Emotional Literacy

Scan the code to view a video on how Can Books Help Children Understand Emotions

Scan the code for a helpful resource for giving positive feedback and encouragement

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PLANNING

Planning your early learning programme is essential for creating effective learning experiences, ensuring a balanced holistic programme that delivers the National Curriculum Framework in a way that meets different children's needs.

THERE ARE TWO PARTS TO PLANNING:

01 An age-appropriate **daily programme** (or timetable) that meets children's various learning and development needs.

02 A detailed **activity or programme plan** for each day that covers all the areas of the National Curriculum Framework.

DAILY PROGRAMME

The daily programme allocates clear and predictable times for daily activities which helps children to know what is coming next.

This helps with classroom management and makes children feel safe and secure.

It needs to allow for structured group learning times (like ring time, music, and story) as well as free play, snack and toilet times.

A good daily programme will include plenty of free play time as well as group times for the whole class and times when a practitioner works with a small group of children.

There needs to be a balance between more active times when children can move around indoors and outdoors as well as times when children are sitting and having to concentrate.

The time allowed for activities will vary as children develop.

- For younger children group times need to be short (10-15 min).
- As they reach 4 – 5 years, they can manage a group time of up to 20 minutes.

LEARNING PROGRAMME PLANNING

The learning programme is the set of activities planned for each part of the daily timetable to support children's development across the Early Learning and Development Areas (ELDAs) of the National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four.

Using a theme or content focus (e.g., All About Me, My Family, Seasons, People at Work) helps connect learning across the day and over several days or weeks.

The Department of Basic Education provides suggested themes and planning guides for daily and weekly programmes.

Good planning integrates learning — one activity can support many development areas at the same time.

Activities should reflect children's interests, different learning styles, and developmental levels.

Scan the code to view the Ntataise video on the daily programme

THE GROW ECD app has a full curriculum with lesson plans aligned with the NCF. **Scan the code** to download the app.

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ASSESSMENT

FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING

Assesment is a continuous planned process of identifying, gathering, recording and interpreting information about the performance of children. Various forms of assessment use the gathered information to help improve the process of learning and teaching.

ASSESMENT CAN BE:

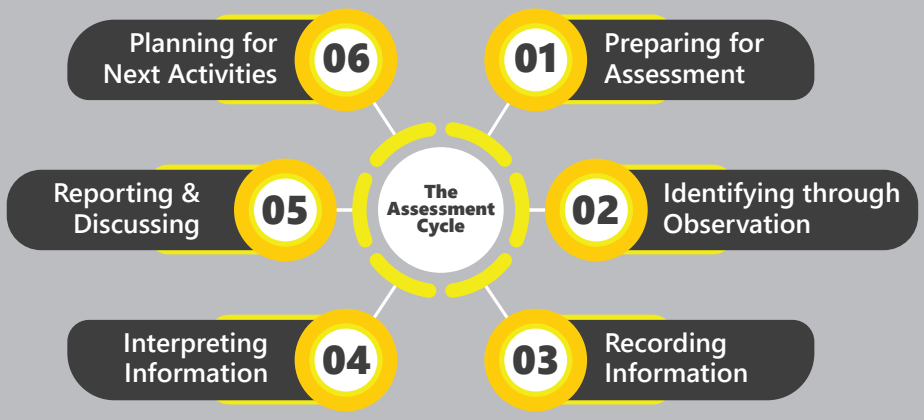
FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT:
The ongoing process of observing and collecting information about children's development over time. This information guides daily planning so practitioners can support each child's next steps in learning. Most assessment in ECD should be formative.

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT:
A summary of what a child knows and can do in relation to developmental milestones at the end of a period of learning and teaching. A written progress report should be shared with parents at least twice a year.

WHY IS ASSESSMENT IMPORTANT?

Knowing more about the developmental progress of the children in your group will help you plan learning experiences that will best support their development.

Not only will you know how they are progressing towards the NCF standards for their stage of development, but you will have a better idea of the specific needs of individual children.



01 Preparing for assessment
Plan fun activities where children can demonstrate specific skills. Make sure every child is observed at least once during the week.

02 Identifying through observation
Watch for moments when a child shows a new skill, a difficulty, or a strong interest. Many important learning moments happen spontaneously during play and daily routines.

03 Recording information
Write a short note or take a photo/video and keep the dated evidence. Build a portfolio for each child with drawings, projects, and observation notes. This can be in an observation book or file.

04 Interpreting information
Use a checklist linked to the NCF development areas to review children's progress. Remember that children may develop faster in some areas than others.

05 Reporting and discussing
Discuss observations with colleagues and share feedback with parents informally and through progress reports. If you are concerned about a possible developmental delay, monitor carefully and discuss referral options with the parent, starting with the clinic.

06 Planning next activities
Use what you observe to plan class activities and guide your interactions with each child. You can also suggest simple activities parents can do at home to support development.

Scan the code to view a webinar by GROW ECD on learner assessment and other helpful resources about assessing learners according to the NCF.

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TEACHING STRATEGIES

As well as ensuring that children feel accepted, comfortable and safe to explore and try new things there are several strategies to support and extend children's learning through play.

ENGAGING WITH CHILDREN TO SUPPORT LEARNING

Learning does not just happen. The teacher's role is to use a number of different teaching strategies that advance children's learning to the next level. It needs to be challenging enough to help them learn new skills or behaviours but not so difficult that they become discouraged. When working with children don't intervene in their play too soon. They need time to make mistakes, learn from these, solve problems creatively and negotiate solutions to social conflict. In some situations teachers should simply observe, in others become a play partner, and in others a talk partner.

01 FOLLOW THE CHILD'S LEAD AND INTERESTS

Children learn best when they are enjoying the activity. Build on what children are doing, encourage them to share their ideas and problems and invite them to consider other ideas. Give them time to try out their ideas, and solve the problem even if you know that they might not work.

For example, children are building a tower from blocks:
"Tell me about what you are making."
"Why do think this part collapsed?"
"Shall we try to build it up again?"

02 ENGAGE IN CONVERSATIONS

Conversation is the basis for children's learning, and how teachers talk and listen to children makes a difference to their thinking and learning.

For example,
- Ask questions that relate to what the child is doing and saying.
- Wait for the child to respond.
- Encourage the child to explain their ideas. Don't interrupt.
- Don't overload the child with information.

03 MODEL SKILLS OR DEMONSTRATE A CONCEPT

Sometimes, teachers need to demonstrate a concept or skill before children can confidently explore it. For e.g., a teacher might model how to safely hold and use scissors before inviting children to practise cutting, or demonstrate how to divide a sandwich into halves and quarters when introducing the idea of parts of a whole.

For example,
- Keep demonstrations short, interactive, and engaging.
- Allow time for children to practise and experiment immediately afterwards

04 ASK QUESTIONS

Good questions support the child's efforts in problem-solving and help teachers to find out what children are thinking and already know. **Make sure that when you ask questions you give children time to think about their answers.**

There are different kinds of questions teachers can ask:
Closed questions: Questions that ask for information and can usually be answered with a 'yes' or a 'no.
Open-ended questions: are questions that have many possible answers.

05 PROVIDE ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Teachers can add new play materials to existing ones already set out. These additions invite children to deepen their exploration, practise new skills, and make links between different areas of learning.

For example,
- Introduce writing materials for children to create shopping lists during makebelieve play.
- Add play animals and figurines to the block corner to encourage storytelling, problem-solving, and symbolic thinking

06 SIMPLIFY OR EXTEND AN ACTIVITY

SIMPLIFY: If a child struggles with an activity, the teacher can break it into smaller steps or offer simpler materials, such as a puzzle with fewer pieces or thicker crayons.

EXTEND: If a child finds the task easy, the teacher can extend their learning by adding challenge - for example, cutting out shapes instead of simple cuts, offering a puzzle with more pieces, or encouraging a more complex block design.

Scan the code to view a video on extending children's ideas in play

Scan the code to view a video on examples of classroom layout and teaching strategies.

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GROSS MOTOR SKILLS

Gross motor skills are the ability to control large muscles in the body to enable activities like walking, jumping, throwing and catching, running and climbing.

IMPORTANCE OF GROSS MOTOR SKILLS IN PRESCHOOL

Gross motor skills help children move with confidence, strength, and control. They build the foundation for balance, coordination, and focus - skills children need for play, learning, and later tasks like sitting at a desk or writing.

Encouragingly, Early learning programmes provide safe opportunities for safe movement!

RISKS TO GROSS MOTOR DEVELOPMENT

In unsafe or crowded urban environments, opportunities for active play can be limited. Children may spend excessive time indoors or on screens, reducing opportunities for movement and exploration.

Without safe, engaging spaces for physical play, children may struggle to develop balance, coordination, and muscle strength - skills that are critical for their physical and cognitive growth.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROSS MOTOR DEVELOPMENT

Outdoors

Early learning programmes should ideally provide outdoor spaces equipped to encourage movement and exploration. This might include large, fixed equipment such as swings, slides, and climbing frames, or smaller portable resources like hoops, ropes, and balls. Simple games - such as throwing a ball at a target or into a bucket - can also build coordination and control.

Indoors

Gross motor development can also be supported inside the classroom:

- During Circle Time, children can take turns leading an action while others follow.
- In Music and Movement Time, they can sing action songs, dance, and move in different ways.
- Teachers can create obstacle courses indoors or outdoors to promote balance, coordination, and motor planning.

LIMITED OUTDOOR SPACE: teachers can rotate classes to share outdoor time or supervise a walk to a nearby park or safe open space.

During gross motor activities, teachers should avoid having children in long lines for their turn. Instead, set up several stations around the play area, each with a different activity. Small groups can rotate between stations, ensuring all children stay active, engaged, and have plenty of opportunities to practise a range of gross motor skills.

Scan the code to access resources on gross motor skillsfrom GROW ECD. *You may need to sign up to access these resources (at no cost)*

Resources are are also available onthe grow ECD free app. **Scan the code** to download the app

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OPEN-ENDED MATERIALS

Open-ended materials are items with no specific purpose and can be used on their own or with other materials. Unlike closed ended materials like puzzles, worksheets and books they can be used in many different ways.

EXAMPLES OF OPEN-ENDED MATERIALS

Open-ended materials are developmentally appropriate for young children of various ages and can be used for sensory, creative, or dramatic play.

Examples of open-ended materials include:

- sand, water,
- blocks, cloths,
- play dough or clay,
- paint, natural materials,
- ribbons, buttons,
- ropes, crayons,
- papers, blocks
- interlocking construction toys,
- waste materials like cardboard boxes, tins and plastic
- containers

LOOSE PARTS

Loose parts, such as **stones, stumps, logs, branches, small twigs, seeds, shells and, gravel, water, grass, pine cones, bark, and feathers**, are examples of open-ended materials.

They encourage problem-solving, curiosity and exploration. They enable children to be creative and express themselves in play, often using materials to explore and represent other things.

Understanding that something can stand for or represent something else – e.g. a block can be a cell phone, a cloth can be a river, not only builds **imagination** but also develops **symbolic thought** which is important for reading and maths which are based on symbols.

Scan the code to for more information on open-ended materials and how to use them

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ROOM ARRANGEMENT

Your classroom set up is an important way of supporting young children's development and a regular set up helps children to feel safe and secure. Setting up distinct play or interest areas shows children where certain activities take place and helps them return materials when finished.

TIPS FOR LAYOUT AND SET UP

Shared spaces with group seating (table or floor) promote social interaction and cooperation.

Open spaces allow children to move freely between activities.

Quieter areas for individual play (like puzzles or reading) should be placed away from busier, noisier zones.

Busy zones (block, fantasy play) should be larger to accommodate group play.

Cupboards, shelves, screens, chairs, and mats can be used to **divide areas** and store related materials.

In **smaller classrooms**, teachers can make creative use of available space - such as an outdoor stoep or passage - provided it remains easily supervised

ART AREA

Art activities include drawing, painting, cutting and pasting, modelling, and also making 3D constructions (boxes, toilet rolls). **Art is important for fine motor and perceptual development.**

To help creativity children should have many opportunities to choose what they want to draw or make. Craft activities like paper or wool weaving, simple sewing can be done with older children.

MAKE BELIEVE/ FANTASY AREA

This is where children can act out different roles. Along with a home area, there can be dress-up clothes for both boys and girls, and additional themed spaces like a shop, or clinic. **Children can also create their own play areas.**

Providing open-ended materials encourages creativity and imagination. To promote diversity, include clothing and items from different cultures.

BLOCK AREA

This refers to big blocks not small table blocks or interlocking blocks. They can be wood or hard foam or improvised from stuffed boxes.

Loose parts such as wood offcuts, boxes stuffed with newspaper and covered can also be used.

Accessories like small people, animals, cars and a mat of a road may be added.

EDUCATIONAL TOYS/GAMES

These include table blocks and interlocking building toys like Lego or construction straws, puzzles, manipulatives like pegboards, threading and stringing beads, table blocks, and games such as sorting and matching games, seriation games, shapes, dice, things to count.

These can be improvised. Maths related materials are sometimes organised into a maths area in classes for older children.

BOOK AREA

Books can be stored on a shelf, in a hanging bag, or placed invitingly on tables in a comfortable reading area, such as at a table or on a mat with cushions.

There should be books on a variety of topics, including picture stories (traditional and modern), concept books (about size, numbers, or colours), and information books about the world (people, feelings, cultures, science, nature, and families).

NATURE AND SCIENCE AREA

Science tables are places where children can explore, observe, and test ideas. They might experiment with sound, floating and sinking, or other simple concepts. Tools such as magnets, magnifying glasses, and balance scales can be included to **encourage curiosity and investigation.**

The nature area can include living things and natural objects like plants, insects, rocks, seeds and small pets.

THEME TABLE

The theme table displays objects, pictures, and materials related to the current learning theme. It gives children the chance to **explore, ask questions, and make connections between real-life experiences and classroom activities.**

Items might include books, photos, natural materials, or everyday objects linked to the topic. Children can help collect and display items, encouraging curiosity and participation.

SENSORY AREA

Sensory play helps develop fine motor skills, problem-solving abilities, and descriptive language as children explore different textures and materials.

Sand and water play are the most common sensory activities and can be offered at indoor tables or in larger outdoor areas. Other materials such as mud, slime, sawdust, or shredded paper can also be used for exploration.

Scan the code to for more information on open-ended materials and how to use them

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