

# A Day in an Anganwadi Centre

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Play is essential for a child's well-being, growth, and healthy development. A child's 'Right to play' is emphasised in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989), the world's most widely ratified human rights treaty in history.<sup>1</sup> Play occupies a vital place in the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment processes of the early years and contributes to children's learning and development.

The change in family structure from joint families to nuclear families combined with the change in lifestyle where both parents go out to work, in addition to the increased focus on academics has reduced the amount of time a child could spend playing. Urban children are more vulnerable in this aspect than rural children. So, despite its numerous benefits, time for play has been markedly reduced for most children.

## Importance of play as pedagogy in early years

Young children have an inherent desire and capacity to play due to which there is no external motivation required for making them play. Play is the means through which they make sense of the world around them. Play contributes to their cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being and is essential to their development. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises this by stating that Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) must ideally be play- and activity-based and

facilitate both indoor and outdoor play.

Play needs to be child-centred, and children must enjoy playing. It should make them explore their environment through thought and inquiry to find ways to satisfy their curiosity.

Depending on the teacher's scaffolding, play can be broadly categorised into free play and guided play. In free play, the child decides and controls what and how he or she plays; the teacher is a passive observer. Whereas, in guided play, the teacher also becomes a player and plays with the child collaboratively within the learning environments provided. Apart from this, play can also be categorised into indoor play and outdoor play according to where the children play. The teacher needs to strike a balance and plan the right mix of these play categories to provide new learning opportunities and consolidate existing learnings. For systematic learning to happen through play, the teacher needs to plan and prepare play activities well in advance and during guided playtime, give appropriate instructions to children and facilitate the play.

Play is one of the six teaching practices that we focus on in the capacity-building of *anganwadi* teachers in Sangareddy. This teaching practice emphasises that teachers provide opportunities for free and guided play indoor and outdoor for at least 60 minutes daily.

Provide opportunities for free and guided play indoor and outdoor for 60 mins

- Use activities that involve large muscles for developing gross motor skills and body balance
- Facilitate environment that enables children to explore, experiment and make choices
- Use activities that involve small muscles and develop fine motor skills and coordination
- Provide opportunities for children to play, collaborate, share and negotiate with other children
- Provide scope for imagination, imitation and creative expression through dramatic play, role play and dramatisation etc.

### Is play a waste of time?

Adhemma is a teacher in an *anganwadi* centre about 120 km from Hyderabad. Shailaja is a child in her care. Shailaja's mother came to Adhemma one evening to express her concern about seeing Shailaja playing at the *anganwadi* most of the time and was worried that Shailaja was not learning much which might be a disadvantage when she joins grade I. Adhemma told her to come to the centre the next day at 10:30 am.

Shailaja's mother came in when the children were having their daily eggs that are provided at the centre. Adhemma told Shailaja's mother that she started the day at 9 am when she welcomed the children with greetings. This was followed by a circle-time which started with a conversation, followed by rhymes with actions and story-time, each lasting 20 minutes. After this, the children were given eggs to eat. When they finished eating, they washed their hands. Then, the teacher announced that they could go outside to play.



Each child picked one or two play items of their choice from the outdoor play box that was kept next to the teacher's table and ran outside. The teacher pointed to the children and told Shailaja's mother, 'Look how happy the children are when they go out to play. Happy children learn more and better than sad children.' The teacher also went out and sat on the front veranda from where she could watch the children play. The teacher said, 'There are two types of play that the children play outdoors. Free play is when children play among themselves without any rules. In this functional play, the children use bodily movements, sometimes without objects, such as running, jumping, and sliding, and sometimes with objects, such as ball, bat or hula hoop. All these lead to the development and strengthening of muscles of their body.'



After 20 minutes, the teacher said to Shailaja's mother, 'It is now time for guided play. Guided outdoor play is when the children listen to the instructions that I give and play following rules of the games.' She called the children and divided them into two groups. She drew a big circle on the ground and asked one group to stand inside it. They were going to be the monkeys, she told them. She made the second group spread out and stand outside the circle and gave them a ball. She showed them how they had to throw the ball only to others in their group (outside the circle) in such a way that the monkeys in the centre would not be able to catch the ball. Each time the monkeys caught the ball, she gave one point to the monkey group. After 10 minutes, she interchanged the teams. In the end, she asked each team to clap for the other team.



The teacher then asked the children to wash their hands and go inside. One child took charge of pouring water and the other children took turns to soap and scrub their hands thoroughly. The teacher too washed her hands and told Shailaja's mother how throwing and catching ball improves children's eye-hand coordination. 'This is a very important skill

for children to learn as this is what will help them the next year when they start writing alphabets and numbers,' she explained to the mother.

Back inside the centre, the teacher gave each child a blank sheet of paper and two crayons each and asked them to draw the plants which they had seen during their nature walk the day before. Soon it was time for the mid-day meal, after which the children took a nap.



At 2 pm, the teacher woke the children up and asked them to play in the 'learning corners'. A few children picked up the building blocks and started building a train, a bus and buildings with them. The teacher pointed to them and told Shailaja's mother, 'Fingers in the children's hand gets strengthened when they play with building blocks. They also use their creative skills to build different structures and learn by way of trial and error. This also increases children's perseverance and focus.'

The teacher pointed to some children who were in the 'book corner' skimming through the books and pretending to read them. Some children were in the 'doll corner' where one child was cooking in a kitchen set and role-playing as a mother. Another two children were playing with a doctor set, with one child pretending to be a doctor and another a patient. The teacher said, 'During free play, children imitate what they observe in the adult world, imagining and constructing new realities and testing them out with other children. These interactions with peers develop their social skills.'

Shailaja's mother was astonished to know that through simple play her child was learning so many things. She let go of her belief that play is a waste of time. She thanked the teacher for patiently explaining the processes in the *anganwadi* centre and promised to support the teacher in every way possible. The teacher informed her, 'This Saturday, during the ECCE Day (monthly parents-teacher meeting) you can explain what you have experienced today to other parents so that they will also understand how they can support their children better.'

## Creating an enabling environment

### *Physical environment*

An *anganwadi* centre should be clean, hygienic, and safe for the children to be able to play. Where there is only one room for use, clear segregation of the cooking area (for mid-day meals) must be made. The teacher must organise learning corners with sufficient materials for the children to play with. The play and printed materials must be dynamic and based on what the teacher is planning to engage children with on a particular day.

### *Psychological environment*

The teacher must create a fear-free environment for the children by being caring and respectful. Children must be comfortable enough to fully express themselves without hesitation. All children should get opportunities depending on their stage of development. They must be appreciated for their contribution during play, irrespective of their performance.

## Role of play in assessment and intervention

Paper and pencil tests are useful for assessing children in primary grades but not for those in an *anganwadi* centre. Play is one of the ways to understand the levels of development in children in an *anganwadi* centre where the teacher facilitates individual and group play activities, observes the children, and notes her observations down as anecdotes, observation records, and running notes. These observations which are noted over a period of time are used to rate the level of development across the various domains. These can be used to plan further interventions regarding the opportunities that each child needs to be given. This is a continuous process that the teacher needs to follow throughout the year.

## Benefits of play

Play helps not just physical but also the linguistic, social, cognitive, emotional, and creative development of children. Play is critical for the healthy development of the brain as it strengthens the synaptic connections through the repetition of frequently used skills.

Children communicate with each other during play. They talk, listen and observe the interactions among other children during role play and dramatic play. They listen to the instruction of the teacher. All these are opportunities for them to learn and develop their verbal-linguistic abilities.

Play involves physical movement which helps

children develop strength, flexibility, dexterity, coordination and greater control of their muscles. Through play, they explore and understand their body's abilities and limits. Play requires thinking, analysing, reasoning, predicting, and problem-solving to achieve set goals. Children also discover their emotions, social relationships and practices of sharing, negotiating, cooperating, and caring when they play with other children. Children use their imagination to apply and expand their current understanding and their creativity to create new things with what is present around them.



Solitary play helps a child explore surroundings at his or her own pace. Children play with toys and find multiple ways of doing so. They create their world through imagination. Dramatic play helps children in testing out abstract concepts, like money; and helps them overcome their fears by practising adult roles leading to the development of new skills. All these result in increased confidence, resiliency, and self-esteem in participating in social settings.

Group play helps children to practise communication, sharing, taking turns, self-control, decision-making, and leadership skills. When a child starts playing with new children it reduces his or her anxiety and fear. This, over time, will give the child the confidence to face new people in life.

### Upward integration of play

In pre-primary classes, play is assumed to be an integral part of the academic environment. Beyond pre-primary classes, play is confined to the 'Play Time' period and seen separately. The NEP 2020 packages early grades (I and II) with pre-primary as 'Foundational years' which would aid in play spilling over from pre-primary to early grades too. For play to be used as learning in the primary and upper primary grades, a change in the mindset of teachers in accepting play as pedagogy will be required. This can be achieved with focused capacity-building of teachers for upward integration of play.

### Endnotes

- i United Nation Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Convention on the Rights of the Child. General Assembly Resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>. Accessed April 22, 2021

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