

The National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022 is a landmark document that provides comprehensive guidelines – goals, pedagogical ideas and learning standards that the school system in India should strive to achieve in the first five years of children’s schooling. This article focuses on - *How Children Learn, Importance of Play, Learning through Play* and the relationship of play with learning goals and standards for 3- to 8-year-old children – aspects outlined in sections 1, 2 and 4 of the curriculum framework.

## Young children and learning

*Illustration 1:* A 3-year-old child is observing a line of ants walking at the edge of the classroom. The child keenly observes that one of the bigger ants is carrying a small ant and continuing to follow the rest. A 5-year-old comes with a small transparent box, catches a few ants in it, and then quickly closes the box to preserve and observe the ants.

*Illustration 2:* A class I teacher regularly tells stories. Children watch her expressions and listen to her intently – the roaring of the lion, the squeaking of a mouse, the sound of a squirrel when it sees a snake approaching. With a regular routine of story time, many children pick up the book and read it aloud to each other; some during their free time, take animal puppets and start enacting the story.

Based on the above examples, for the following questions, we deduce these answers:

*What do these illustrations indicate about young children?*

- Children are curious.
- Children engage with nature and their environment.
- Children are observant.
- Children like to explore.
- Children imitate.
- Children express.

*What do they say about how children learn?*

- Children observe and learn from the environment.

- Children engage with material, people, feelings and things around them to learn.
- Children explore, investigate and manipulate to make meaning of the world around them.

*Would we call this playful learning?*

A child observing a line of ants as an ‘onlooker’, feels joy and wonder. Perhaps it is an enjoyable experience that can be broadly categorised as the child being involved and engrossed in play and a playful experience.

In illustration 2, the act of repeating the story, reading in their free time, narrating to each other, drawing and enacting characters from the story – all these active learning experiences also seem playful in nature. Children have fun doing this and do it by choice.

In both the illustrations, playing and learning are not two distinct entities. They go together seamlessly in the way children experience it.

## Teaching-learning in the Foundational Stage

Let us look at two situations.

*Situation A:* A classroom with 25 children, working in small groups in different parts of the room – one group is reading stories, another group is playing with blocks, beads and manipulatives, a third group is scribbling on the running blackboard and a fourth group is playing *doctor-doctor*. The teacher is moving from one group to another – asking questions on a particular story to the reading group; making a pattern of beads with the group playing beads; naming the drawings that children have made on the running blackboard and becoming a pharmacist for the group playing *doctor-doctor*.

*Situation B:* Another classroom with 25 children, where they are seated on benches with notebooks and pencils and looking studiously into their books, trying to copy-write numbers 1 to 100 for an entire period. The teacher walks to and fro in the classroom, making sure there is no noise. If a child’s writing is not legible, she erases the writing and asks the child to write again. This is the routine for most of the

day – writing from the blackboard, quietly, multiple times, except for two 15- and 30-minute recesses available to children to move around and do things of their choice.

Both are classrooms for 5- to 6-year-old children, belonging to similar socio-economic backgrounds.

What is *common* to these two situations?

1. Both are teaching-learning situations inside a classroom.
2. Both situations have a committed and concerned teacher who is interested in children's learning and completion of the syllabus.
3. Both classrooms have children of the same age group with similar developmental characteristics.

What is *different* in these two situations?

1. Children's participation, freedom, and control:
  - a. *Situation A* would be noisy with student movement, talking and sharing of toys.
  - b. *Situation B* would be quiet with an obvious sense of discipline.
2. Choice and students' role:
  - a. In *Situation A*, children are moving around, talking and trying new things and the teacher is participating in what the children have chosen to do. The pedagogy seems to be active exploration.
  - b. In *Situation B*, an adult is teaching, children are sitting and learning by copy-writing, practising, and repeating tasks designed by the teacher. Following instructions and task completion seem to be the key objectives.
3. Interaction:
  - a. In *Situation A*, interaction is high – interaction between children, children and the teacher, and children and the environment (toys and material). The environment is seen as a third teacher.
  - b. In *Situation B*, interaction is minimal between children; may be high on occasion between teacher and children; and between children and play material it may be limited to specific activities and task completion. For instance, in the above example, the bench, notebook, pen and blackboard are what children interact with the most.

Lastly, there seems to be wonder, joy and enjoyment in *Situation A*, aspects that are completely missing in *Situation B*.

Can we categorise *Situation A* as the one that would provide more active learning opportunities and, therefore, more holistic development opportunities? Playfulness in the learning environment contributes to more effective learning than passive engagement and copy-writing, which might show the volume of work done by children but does not result in real learning – learning that enables children to make sense of the world around them.

The question remains: How can the teacher in *Situation B* make the same learning experience joyful?

### **Play and playfulness as pedagogy**

The NCF-FS suggests that *play* is characterised by choice, joy and wonder. The learning environment needs to be *playful* to enable learning across all domains of development. While playing, children are active: they organise, plan, imagine, manipulate, negotiate, explore, investigate, and create while making sense of the world. (NCF-FS, pp. 38,39)

This active learning provides children with the opportunity for rich sensorial, cognitive, linguistic, physical and motor experiences, along with interactions with the people and world around them.

The NCF-FS further suggests that learning at this stage is an active and interactive process in which children learn through play and interaction with other children, and more-experienced others. Children are actively engaged in their social and cultural experiences, and they constantly adjust and use new information to make sense of their perceptions and experiences. Children's playing and playfulness can be nurtured and strengthened through experiences of active participation with others, and with natural, real-world materials that provoke and enhance learning, imagination, creativity, innovation, and problem-solving in diverse and unique ways. (p. 38)

The document, in this section on the importance of play, further outlines the various types of play, and how the degree of control and structure changes from free play to guided and structured play, to rule-based games and play. Further, it provides examples of types of play, based on the key developmental aspects the type of play fosters. (*Tables 1 and 2*)

Table 1. Types of play based on structure and control.

	Free Play	Guided Play	Structured Play
Roles	Child-led Child directed	Child-led Teacher-supported	Teacher-led Children actively participate
What do Children do?	Children decide all aspects of their play - what to play, how to play it, for how long to play, with whom to play.	Children plan and lead their own play, similarly as they do during free play.	Children actively listen, follow rules, participate in activities and games planned by Teachers.
What do Teachers do?	Teachers organise a stimulating play environment in the classroom, observe children, and help when children ask for support.	Teachers offer support and actively facilitate play. Teachers guide the children in different tasks that they are involved in, ask questions, play with the children to meet specific learning objectives.	Teachers carefully plan activities and games with specific rules to promote Competencies in a learning sequence. Language and mathematics games, nature walks, songs and rhymes are planned on a daily basis.

Source. National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage. 1.4.2. Learning through Play. Table 1.4A. p. 41

These three types of play – free play, guided play and structured play – show increasing levels of control and planning by the teacher and decreasing levels of choice by the children. Often, in guided play, the

child initiates the activity (as in illustrations 1 and 2, and Situation A) and the teacher becomes an active participant and facilitator in the process.

Table 2. Types of play.

#	Types of Play	Examples
1	Dramatic Play/ Fantasy Play	Use a small stick for a horse to dramatize a story. Acting like family members, Teachers, Doctors. Dramatizing a favourite character, e.g., <i>Jhansi ki Rani</i> , <i>Rani Chennamma</i> , <i>Chota Bheem</i> , <i>Shaktimaan</i> .
2	Exploratory Play	<i>Jodo, Todo, Phir Jodo</i> - dismantling and assembling objects (e.g., clock, toilet flush, tricycle). Experiments with instruments (e.g., magnets, prisms, magnifying glass). Mixing dals <i>channa</i> , <i>rajma</i> and sorting. Sand play, Water play.
3	Environment/ Small World play	Using miniature animals, furniture, kitchen set, doctor set to recreated the real world and engage with it. Nature walk identifying trees, plants, insects, birds, animals, sounds, colours.
4	Physical Play	Exploring the body through music, movement, dramatization, outdoor play, balancing, games.
5	Games with Rules	Hopscotch ( <i>Kith Kith</i> , <i>Stapu</i> , <i>Langdi</i> ), Tag, Snakes and Ladders, <i>Chaupad</i> , Spinning Tops ( <i>Lattu</i> , <i>Buguri</i> ), Marbles ( <i>Goli</i> ), <i>Kokla Chapaki</i> , <i>Pitthu</i> , <i>Pallanguzhi</i> .

Source. National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage. 1.4.2. Learning through Play. Table 1.4B. p. 42

The document provides another categorisation of play based on the type of engagement – is it imagining role plays, exploring material through manipulation, or the physical impulse to run, jump, balance, and so on? The role of curriculum in keeping a child’s learning and developmental characteristics at the core would provide opportunities to children to socialise, construct, investigate and express – natural impulses of children (Dewey, 1900, pp. 43, 44) – much of which a playful learning environment would allow.

Organising the curriculum and daily routine to meet the requirements of the curriculum and learning standards, while ensuring a rich playful learning environment for all children may seem challenging, especially in our large classrooms with a skewed pupil-teacher ratio.

What enables optimal learning among children is the teacher’s understanding of children, their contexts, and their age-specific developmental trends, curricular goals focused on holistic development, learning standards, strategies to organise time and planning of curricular experiences. Several pre-school and *anganwadi* programmes have shown that it is possible to create and sustain a playful learning environment while ensuring that the curriculum is fully transacted.

### Role of teachers

A teacher of young children would require several kinds of preparation. Their role involves planning and organising the manifold aspects of a curricular programme to achieve its objectives in their entirety.

1. *Belief in playful learning*: The first requirement would be the teacher’s own understanding of children – their characteristics and their nature to ask, inquire, talk, explore and understand; and the difference in their learning needs. Equally important are the principles of learning, and a strong belief in the potential of playful learning and in creating an environment for holistic learning. Equally critical is bringing parents on board regarding the importance of play-based learning.
2. *Children as a resource*: Children’s ideas, moods, routines, interests, questions and their energy and curiosity often provide excellent starting points for a teacher’s engagement with them. Children’s voices and interests should be actively used as resources to create the necessary learning environment.
3. *Creating the environment*: Well-designed learning

environments are the third teacher. Creating the environment includes utilising and organising the various spaces that children engage with – outdoor and indoor; providing play material, a running blackboard and spaces to express, read, use manipulatives and open-ended toys and material in a sandpit, a doll corner etc., and a routine and rhythm that children can follow.

4. *Sustaining the environment*: The teacher would need to build a network of partners – the children, parents, and the larger community – to establish the importance of play-based learning. This involves reworking the expectations from the benefits of the time spent in filling notebooks with writing, as compared to the time to actively engage with play and a playful learning environment.

*Is it possible to achieve the Learning Standards across all domains, and goals of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy by the end of this stage while using play-based pedagogy?*

The NCF-FS outlines key curricular goals and competencies for all domains of development. It further outlines the learning standards to be achieved by the end of the Foundational Stage. It provides a range of developmental aspects to be achieved by children through the Foundational Stage.

Language and literacy learning standards see a progression from oral language to emergent reading and writing, and formal *akshara gyan*. Similarly, the early mathematics standards see a developmental range for all early and emergent mathematics concepts, followed by number sense, and basic arithmetic and geometry by age 8 years.

### In conclusion

In terms of the allocation of time and balance between ‘systematic teaching’ and play-based learning opportunities, NCF-FS clearly states:

Children in this Stage learn through play which includes a wide range of activities and stimulating experiences. All these activities and experiences need to be organized in a manner that children remain engaged along with being emotionally and mentally motivated to learn. Within this broad idea of play, it must be noted that children also learn by observing, doing, listening, reading, speaking, writing, thinking, and practicing. They learn new concepts, interpret them, and connect this newly introduced knowledge with

their existing knowledge. Explicit and systematic teaching, some practice and application is necessary especially once children begin literacy

and mathematics. However, all of this, must adhere to the basic requirement of children's positive engagement with strong elements of fun and play.

Source. National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage. 1.4.3 Engaging Children for Play. p.44

### References

Dewey, J. (1990/1900). *The School and Society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press

National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage. National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). 2022



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In the heart of a lively village, near the *anganwadi*, an evening unfolds with groups of children engaging joyfully in different forms of play. Educators delight in observing their social participation. Different types of play – with objects, such as plastic cups; symbolic play in which they make different shapes with mud; games with rules, like lagori; socio-dramatic play – a group of children pretending to take out a ‘Ganesh procession’; and of course, physical play, like jumping, hopping and running – all of these showcase the richness of children's imagination and their connection to local traditions. The scene is magical (jaadui).

*Umamaheshwara Rao Jaggana, Jaadui Pitara | The Magic of Play in Early Childhood, p. 55*