Play for Imagination
Introduction

Play and imagination are central to how young children's brains develop. Through playful experiences children build the foundations for thinking, learning, emotional regulation, and making sense of the world around them.



Imaginative Play

Playful, imaginative experiences support the development of the brain in ways that more structured activities cannot. During play, different areas of the brain work together; strengthening connections that support memory, language, movement and emotional regulation. Imaginative play, such as pretending, storytelling or creating small worlds, supports the development of executive function including decision making, self-regulation and flexible thinking, all of which are linked to the prefrontal cortex Lillard, A. S., Pinkham, A. M. & Smith, E. (2011), pretend play and cognitive development. At the same time, children are drawing on memory systems, emotional responses and physical movement, showing that imagination is not just a thinking process but a whole-body experience. These early foundations are critical, not only for school readiness, but for lifelong learning, relationships and wellbeing.

- Imaginative play strengthens executive function, including focus and self-regulation Galyer, K. T. & Evans, I. M. (2001).
- Social play supports empathy and understanding of others and builds friendships (Smith, 2009; Smits-van der Nat et al.,(2024).
- Movement and imagination are closely linked in brain development.
- Early playful experiences help regulate stress responses.
- Reduced opportunities for play may limit the development of flexible thinking.

Imagination In Nature

A multi-site case study examined preschool children in two natural outdoor classrooms in the United States. (Kiewra, C. & Veselack, E. (2016) Playing with Nature: Supporting Preschoolers' Creativity in Natural Outdoor Classrooms. The International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education, 4(1), p. 70–95 The environments were intentionally designed using natural materials and open-ended spaces, with no fixed play equipment. The focus was on how natural environments support creativity, imagination and problem-solving.

What happened

Children used the space in highly imaginative ways, particularly through building structures using natural materials, creating small worlds, and narratives combining objects in novel ways. Rather than using materials for a fixed purpose, children reinterpreted them. Imaginative play was not directed by adults, but emerged through exploration and repetition over time.





Key findings (evidence-based)

The study identified conditions that consistently supported imaginative play:

1. Time: Children needed extended, uninterrupted periods to develop ideas.
2. Space: Predictable, familiar environments supported deeper engagement.
3. Open-ended materials: Natural loose parts enabled flexible, creative use.
4. The role of the adult: Adults observed and supported rather than directed.
5. 72% of observations showed multiple elements of creativity, imagination and working together.
6. Play became more complex and sustained over time.

Imagination
Setting the Foundation

Opportunities to support imaginative play in nature are many and varied. Natural environments offer a richness that encourages children to invent, adapt and revisit ideas over time.



The Role of Boredom

One of the key benefits of allowing space for boredom is the opportunity it creates for creativity to develop. When children are not given an immediate activity or direction, they begin to draw on their own ideas, experimenting, exploring and finding new ways to play. This process supports imagination, problem-solving and independence, as children learn to initiate their own play and adapt it over time. These experiences can also support children beyond the early years, helping them to feel more confident managing quieter moments and finding ways to engage themselves.

There is also something here for practitioners to reflect on. Embracing these moments can feel uncomfortable, particularly when there is a sense that we should be "doing" or providing something more. However, by allowing ourselves to stay present, to notice what is emerging and to respond thoughtfully rather than react quickly, we create space for richer play experiences. In doing so, we not only support children's development, but also begin to recognise the value of slowing down, being resourceful and finding contentment in the moment.

Let them learn to cope with boredom and 'unbore' themselves and you will unleash a world of creativity."

Sandi Mann, author of The Science of Boredom.

The Role of the Adult in Imaginative Environments

Practitioners play a key role in creating the conditions where imaginative play can flourish. This is not about directing play or introducing set ideas, but about shaping an environment that invites curiosity and possibility. Research highlights that children are more likely to engage in creative and imaginative play when they have access to open-ended materials, familiar spaces, and time to explore without interruption (Lillard et al., 2013). The adult's role begins before the play starts, through thoughtful provision of resources, flexible spaces and an understanding that not all play needs a clear outcome.

Observation, Not Direction

High quality imaginative play is often supported through careful observation rather than instruction. By tuning into children's interests, practitioners can notice emerging themes and gently extend play without taking control of it. The American Academy of Paediat-rics (2018) highlights that child-led play supports the development of executive function and self-regulation, both of which are strengthened when children are given autonomy. In practice, this means resisting the urge to intervene too quickly, particularly in moments where children appear unsure or bored, as these can often lead to deeper engagement.





Beyond individual interactions, practitioners help create a wider culture where imagination is valued. This includes shared expectations across staff, consistency in how play is supported and a recognition that mess, risk, and uncertainty are part of the process. Environments that prioritise flexibility over structure allow children to adapt spaces and resources to suit their ideas. As Vygotsky (1978) suggests, imagination develops through social interaction and experience, with adults playing a crucial role in scaffolding, not leading, this process. By creating a culture of possibility, practitioners ensure that imagination is not an occasional activity, but a central part of everyday learning.

Imagination
Reflecting on Experiences

Sustained play allows children to deepen their thinking and develop more complex ideas over time. We have to allow time for idea, character and worlds to develop, either during the day or over weeks.



Reflecting on Practice

Imagination is expressed in many different ways. Some children may create detailed stories and roles, while others explore ideas through movement, construction or sensory play.
These are all valid and valuable.

Sustained play allows children to deepen their thinking and develop more complex ideas over time.

It is also important to reflect on moments where children appear bored or unsure. Rather than intervening immediately, observe what happens next. Research highlights that deeper levels of play are linked to improved self-regulation and problem-solving (Barker et al.,2014).

- Do children have time to revisit and develop their ideas?
- Are they able to return to the same spaces and resources?
- Is play interrupted by routines or adult direction?
- Are groups of children developing new games?
- What resources/elements could you add to develop?

"Imagination does not become great until human beings, given the courage and the strength, use it to create."

Maria Montessori

Creating Opportunities for Imaginative Nature Play

Spaces can sometimes become overly structured, with resources that suggest a single way of playing or a clear outcome. In contrast, imaginative play in nature thrives where there is flexibility, variety, and a sense of possibility. Are there places to build, hide, gather and return to?
Can children access materials independently and combine them in their own ways? Small changes, such as introducing loose parts or allowing areas to grow and change over time, can create far richer opportunities for imagination.

Different Ways of Imagining

Not all children experience imagination in the same way.
Some children may find it difficult to conjure up clear images in their head when they hear a description. This can be a symptom of aphantasia, the inability to voluntarily cre-ate mental images in one's mind.

For these children, imagination may be expressed through movement, language, construction, or sensory exploration rather than visualisation. This highlights the importance of offering a wide range of play opportunities that do not rely on a single way of thinking or imagining. Open-ended materials, physical play and storytelling can all support different approaches to imagination. By recognising and valuing these differences, practitioners can ensure that all children are able to engage in imaginative play in ways that feel accessible and meaningful to them.

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Imagination
Further Thinking and Reading

A growing body of evidence highlights the importance of open-ended play, creativity and unstructured time in supporting children's development.



Nature Play and Inclusive Environments

Natural environments can be particularly supportive for neurodivergent children, offering sensory-rich, flexible and less overwhelming spaces than more structured indoor settings.
Studies have shown that access to nature can support attention, reduce stress, and improve emotional regulation, particularly for children with additional needs (Kuo et al. 2019; Tillmann et al., 2018).“Nature offers a multisensory environment that supports diverse ways of learning and being.”(Tillmann et al., 2018) By creating inclusive, flexible outdoor environments practitioners can support all children to engage in imaginative play in ways that feel accessible, meaningful, and enjoyable.

Reasearch Reading

- *Pretending with realistic and fantastical stories facilitates executive function in 3-year-old children.* Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, White, R. E. & Carlson, S. M. (2021)
- *Dramatic pretend play games uniquely improve emotional control in young children.* Goldstein, T. R. & Lerner, M. D. (2018)

Reading list

'The Brain That Loves to Play' – Dr Jacqueline Harding
'The Whole-Brain Child' – Daniel J. Siegel & Tina Payne Bryson
'The house of make-believe' – Children's play and the developing imagination – Dorothy and Jerome Singer

'Free to Learn' – Peter Gray
'The Case for Make Believe' – Susan Linn
'A Child's Work' – Vivian Gussin Paley
'The Science of Boredom' - Sandi Mann
'Uniquely Human' – Barry M. Prizant
'Not a Stick' & 'Not a Box' – Antoinette Portis

Neurodiversity and Imagination

Children experience imagination in different ways and this diversity should be recognised and valued within early years practice. Some children may create detailed imaginative narratives, whilst others express ideas through movement, construction or sensory exploration. Neurodivergent children, including those with autism or ADHD, may engage in imaginative play differently; often showing strong interests, repetition or a preference for concrete experiences. As Vygotsky (1978) suggests, imagination develops through experience and interaction, reminding us that there is no single “right” way to imagine.

Boredom and Different Ways of Thinking

Experiences of boredom can also vary across children. For some, particularly those who are neurodivergent, unstructured time may feel overwhelming rather than freeing. However, when carefully supported, these moments can still offer opportunities for creativity and self-directed exploration. Boredom can encourage problem-solving and idea generation, but only when children feel safe and supported within their environment. Practitioners can support this by offering gentle prompts, familiar resources or quiet reassurance, without removing the opportunity for children to lead their own play.

Recognising individual differences is key, ensuring that moments of boredom become a space for possibility, learning, and fun; not overwhelm or frustration.





Imagination
Next steps

Engagement with research, pedagogical practice and relevant organisations will support practitioners who wish to further develop their understanding.



Nature Play and Inclusive Environments

For many families, there can be a perception that learning is best supported through structured activities.

Taking time to communicate the value of imaginative play, particularly in natural environments, can help gently shift this understanding over time.
This is not about asking families to do more, but about helping them see the value in what may already be happening; moments of play, curiosity, and exploration that might otherwise be overlooked.

Simple messages around “less screen time, more green time” can be powerful. Offering practical, achievable ideas, such as visiting a local green space, collecting natural materials or allowing more unstructured time at home, can also support families to feel confident in encouraging imaginative play.
By helping families understand that play, boredom, and exploration are all part of healthy development, we begin to create a more consistent, shared experience for children between home and the setting.

We need to encourage children to learn to ’be’ before they ‘do.’

When a child appears to be doing nothing perhaps they are imaging what the possibilities are for the world and their place in it… and how their future “doings” may affect it.

Bernadine Wilson, SEMH Educational Psychotherapist

Schedule a Seasonal Review of Your Outdoor Spaces

Ask the children to show you their favourite spaces and tell you how they use them. You might be surprised by what matters most to them. Looking at your provision in this way can reveal small but powerful changes, creating places for building, storytelling, hiding away and returning to again and again. Over time, these spaces begin to take on a life of their own, shaped by children's ideas, interests and creativity rather than adult expectations. This is where imagination really starts to grow. You'll notice it in the value placed on curiosity, the time given for getting lost in play and the willingness to embrace a bit of mess, uncertainty and exploration. As you start to see your space through this lens, it becomes more than just the environment, it becomes part of how children learn, connect and make sense of the world.

Be curious

Finally, take a moment to reflect on your own relationship with imagination. How often do you allow yourself to be curious, to explore, to notice the small moments of awe and wonder alongside the children? Reconnecting with your own sense of play can have a powerful impact on how you support children each day.
When you feel confident to slow down and be present, whether that's watching a bug crawl, listening to the wind or wondering "what if?", the experience becomes richer for everyone. By stepping alongside rather than leading, you create space for deeper thinking, creativity and connecting this can be transformative for you as much as the children.



