

Learning through Play: Overview

Connections to *Aistear* and *Síolta*

Aistear

Themes: Well-being, *Identity and Belonging*, *Communicating*, Exploring and Thinking
Guidelines for good practice: Learning and developing through play (pp.52-70)

Síolta Standards

1: Rights of the Child, C1.1, 1.2, 1.3
6: Play, C6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5 6.6, 6.7
Research Digests linked to the above *Standards*

The *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* is intended to help you in your role as curriculum-developer to build, reflect on and extend your curriculum to support babies', toddlers' and young children's early learning and development. Drawing on the early childhood sector's experiences of using *Aistear* and *Síolta*, the Practice Guide includes:

- **Curriculum Foundations** and
- six interconnected **Curriculum Pillars**:
 1. Building Partnerships with Parents
 2. Creating and Using the Learning Environment
 3. Learning through Play
 4. Nurturing and Extending Interactions
 5. Planning and Assessing using *Aistear's* Themes
 6. Supporting Transitions.

This document gives an overview of the pillar, **Learning through Play**. This pillar has a range of resources to help you support and enable children to learn through play in your setting.

Why focus on learning through play?

Aistear and *Síolta* highlight the important role of play in children's lives and provide ideas and suggestions to support learning and development through play. Time, resources and support from practitioners all help children to maximise their fun in, and their learning and development through play.

Learning through Play is one of the pillars in the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*. It has connections to the other pillars, *Building Partnership with Parents*, *Creating and Using the Learning Environment*, *Nurturing and Extending Interactions*, *Planning and Assessing using Aistear's Themes*, and *Supporting Transitions*. This short **introduction** reminds us why learning through play is important, gives a brief **overview** of the set of resources in this part of the Practice Guide and provides **suggestions** on how you might use these.

Aistear's principle on play and hands-on experiences says,

Much of children's early learning and development takes place through play and hands-on experiences. Through these, children explore social, physical and imaginary worlds. These experiences help them to manage their feelings, develop as thinkers and language users, develop socially, be creative and imaginative and lay the foundations for becoming effective communicators and learners (Principles and themes, 2009, p.11).

Similarly, *Síolta's* principle on play acknowledges that, *Play is an important medium through which the child interacts with, explores and makes sense of the world around her/him. These interactions with, for example, other children, adults, materials, events and ideas are key to the child's well-being, development and learning. Play is a source of joy and fulfilment*

for the child. It provides an important context and opportunity to enhance and optimise quality early childhood experiences. As such, play will be a primary focus in quality early childhood settings (2006, p.9).

Standard 6 of *Síolta, Play*, highlights the importance of each child having ample time to engage in freely available and accessible, developmentally appropriate and well-resourced opportunities for exploration, creativity and 'meaning making' in the company of other children, with participating and supportive adults, and alone. *Aistear's* guidelines, *Learning and developing through play* (pp.54- 70) provide information on play including its characteristics as shown in Table 1 below.

The guidelines also highlight the adult's key role in planning, supporting and reviewing play as well as in organising for, and resourcing play. A list of resources for different types of play is included in [Appendix 1](#) (pp.103-106).

Table 1 : Characteristics of play

Characteristic	Description
Active	Children use their bodies and minds in their play. They interact with the environment, with materials and with other people.
Adventurous and risky	Play helps children to explore the unknown. The pretend element offers a safety net that encourages children to take risks.
Communicative	Children share information and knowledge through their play. Their communication can be verbal or non-verbal, simple or complex.
Enjoyable	Play is fun and exciting and involves a sense of humour.
Involved	Children become deeply absorbed and focused in their play, concentrating and thinking about what they are doing.
Meaningful	Children play about what they have seen and heard, and what they know. Play helps them to build and extend their knowledge, understanding and skills in a way that makes sense to them.
Sociable and interactive	Children play alongside or with others. Sometimes they also like and need to play alone.
Symbolic	Children imagine and pretend when they are playing. They try out ideas, feelings and roles. They re-enact the past and rehearse the future. This can involve them 'reading' and 'writing' long before they develop these skills.
Therapeutic	Play helps children to express and work through emotions and experiences.
Voluntary	Children choose to play. Their play is spontaneous. They shape it as they go, changing the characters, events, objects and locations.

Using the resources in this pillar

As with all the pillars in the Practice Guide, there are five categories of resources in *Learning through Play*:

1. Self-evaluation Tools

These provide prompts to help practitioners reflect on their work in order to identify successes and challenges and to note changes they would like to make.

2. Examples and Ideas for Practice

These materials show examples of how different early childhood settings support learning through play.

3. Resources for Sharing

These materials include tip sheets for practitioners on different aspects of learning through play.

4. Action Planning Tools

These provide prompts to help practitioners reflect on their work in order to identify successes and challenges and to note changes they would like to make.

Each category has resources to help you reflect on your practice. You might like to look at the **Self-evaluation Tools** first to help identify your strengths in supporting children's learning and development through play as well as noting changes you would like to make.

There are two of these tools:

- one for practitioners working with children birth-3 years
- one for practitioners working with children aged 3-6 years.

After this, you might be interested in looking at examples and ideas from other practitioners. These materials show examples of how different early childhood settings support learning through play. You'll find these in short podcasts, photo presentations and video clips in the sections, **Examples and Ideas for Practice** and **Resources for Sharing** at www.aistearsiolta.ie. The resources for sharing section includes tipsheets for practitioners on different aspects of learning through play. **The Action Planning Tools** can then help you plan specific changes you want to make in your setting.