

## Play-Based Learning in a Culture of Inquiry in Kindergarten

### The Question

“As an instructional leader, how can I support the implementation of play-based learning and a culture of inquiry among Kindergarten educators and other staff?”

### The Answer

There are five important elements to consider:

1. Understand play-based learning and the “inquiry stance”
2. Establish an optimal learning environment
3. Support the Kindergarten educators
4. Make learning visible
5. Communicate with families and the community



### 1. Understand play-based learning and the “inquiry stance”

Play is a vehicle for learning and rests at the core of innovation and creativity.

[\*The Kindergarten Program\*](#) (2016), p. 18

Children are innately curious, and are naturally inclined to explore, manipulate, build, create, wonder, and ask questions. Play is an ideal vehicle for enabling children to work out their ideas and theories and build on what they already know to deepen their understanding and further their learning. In other words, they move through the world in what might be called an “inquiry stance” – a mindset of questioning and wondering. In effective Kindergarten classrooms, educators adopt this mindset alongside the children to support their play-based learning. Some features of this approach include:

- viewing all children as competent, curious, capable of complex thinking, and rich in potential and experience;



- encouraging play-based learning and an inquiry stance throughout the flow of the day;
- allowing children to be active contributors in their learning and to use their natural curiosity to explore, play, and inquire;
- providing hands-on, child-led, inquiry-based learning experiences that foster exploration, problem solving, creativity, innovation, discovery, and dramatization;
- co-constructing a learning environment with the children to reflect their interests and needs and promote their further development;
- providing classroom materials that are meaningful, inclusive, and open-ended and that change over time to reflect the ideas, theories, and questions children are exploring;
- providing opportunities for small-group and individual learning while ensuring that whole-class meetings have a specific focus and last for a minimum amount of time;
- representing children’s thinking and learning in diverse ways; and
- fully integrating learning related to all four frames of the curriculum in play experiences throughout the day.

## **2. Establish an optimal learning environment**

To foster play-based learning, the learning environment needs to make effective use of time, space, and materials. School leaders and administrators can work collaboratively with educators to establish an optimal learning environment by:

- encouraging the use of all available spaces in the school and the outdoors as places for exploration, play, and inquiry;
- promoting the use of natural materials from the environment and scheduling activities in the outdoors in addition to recess;
- enhancing the educational potential of the environment with a deliberate design of areas for learning;
- ensuring that documentation reflects and displays children’s learning and thinking while engaged in play;
- promoting the use of an “asset lens” (i.e., focusing on children’s strengths and abilities and responding to their needs and opportunities for deeper learning) to support observation and documentation during play;
- providing appropriate technologies for capturing and documenting children’s thinking and learning;
- facilitating the purchase of classroom resources and materials that are appropriate to play-based learning through an inquiry stance;
- providing opportunities for Kindergarten educators to visit other Kindergarten classes that demonstrate effective use of space, time, and materials;
- facilitating the sharing of resources among classes to optimize experiences for all children; and
- considering the criteria for flow of the day in Kindergarten when developing the timetable for the school.

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Early childhood is a critical period in children’s learning and development  
*The Kindergarten Program (2016), p. 9*

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### **3. Support the Kindergarten educators**

In a developmentally appropriate, play-based program, educators facilitate children's learning in a variety of intentional ways, including:

- planning for play and inquiry throughout the day;
- choosing materials and organizing the learning environment to promote different forms of exploration, play, and inquiry;
- co-constructing learning with children to build on their ideas, theories, interests, and needs;
- analysing pedagogical documentation to determine the level of support needed by a child;
- asking questions to provoke further discussions and expand and enhance exploration, play, and inquiry;
- responding to, challenging, or extending children's explorations and inquiries during play; and
- observing and documenting children's thinking and learning while they are engaged in play and inquiry.

School leaders can support Kindergarten educators in carrying out their roles by:

- revisiting possible "intentional Interactions" for each expectation, as set out under "The Educators' Intentional Interactions" in the Expectation Charts in Part 4 of *The Kindergarten Program* (2016);
- providing ongoing opportunities for professional learning and for educators to share effective practices and classroom experiences through professional learning conversations;
- inviting board program or curriculum staff to provide clarification, support, and guidance, as required;
- building capacity with all staff regarding play-based learning and a culture of inquiry;
- using the "rethink, repeat, remove, replace" process to strengthen current practice;
- encouraging staff to take risks by trying one new element at a time until a focus on play-based learning and a culture of inquiry is embedded in their practice;
- modelling a commitment to the vision of Kindergarten as a collaborative learning environment; and
- helping to clarify the concepts and skills in the program document by focusing on how children demonstrate them during exploration, play, and inquiry.

### **4. Make learning visible**

Making children's thinking and learning visible supports documentation of each child's growth in learning in relation to the learning expectations and facilitates development of a program that is based on the children's theories, needs, ideas, and interests. School leaders can support the use of strategies such as:

- having the children represent their thinking and learning through different media such as drawing and dramatization;
- displaying documentation panels with photos and/or scribed language;
- making video clips and/or recordings of conversations and behaviours; and
- maintaining portfolios of children's work containing samples of authentic writing, artefacts, paintings, building projects, and so on.

## 5. Communicate with families and the community

Communication with families and the community is key to the successful implementation of a play-based program. Families want to know how their children develop and learn. With the support of school leaders, educators can communicate information about play-based learning to parents<sup>1</sup> and the community by:

- inviting parents and community members to visit and participate in Kindergarten classes;
- organizing parent workshops or curriculum evenings that focus on play-based learning;
- hosting child-led portfolio conferences where children talk about their learning with their families;
- talking with parents informally on the playground, in the hallways, or as other opportunities arise;
- displaying documentation of children’s thinking and learning throughout the school for all visitors to see;
- keeping lines of communication open using school websites, e-mail updates, and translated newsletters; and
- using clear and concise wording in key messages to support understanding of play-based learning.

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Parents are an integral part of the Kindergarten program, and are often present in the school and classroom.... Families bring with them rich knowledge and varied viewpoints about childrearing practices, childhood, and development.... Mutual respect and reciprocal learning between parents and educators can only benefit the children in the program.

*The Kindergarten Program* (2016), p. 109

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## References

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2016). *The Kindergarten Program*. Toronto: Author.

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<sup>1</sup> The word *parents* is used in this document to refer to parent(s) and guardian(s). It may also be taken to include caregivers or close family members who are responsible for raising the child.