



How to make play educational for 3 to 5-year olds

Play is essential for a healthy child development and is the first form of education that children receive. They learn lots of different skills and behaviours from various types of play as they develop the skills they need for life.

Children often repeat their favourite play activity and when you watch them make their 20th identical rocket out of building bricks day after day, you may wonder, "What are they learning?"

Repetitive play is important and comforting for children, instilling developmental benefits in your child that you might not think about, similarly to young animals, you see lion cubs repeatedly playfully pouncing on each other as they learn the skills they need for hunting. As a parent/carer, you can add to your children's learning by intervening in some activities to make them more educational.

Whilst many children are still at home instead of school, we have produced this document to help you assist with your children's playing activities and help make them more educational to fit in with the Early Years Curriculum.

A practical example of making play educational

This is what Early Years teachers do.

They guide and challenge children when they play in order to help them learn.

It makes playing more rewarding for the adult and the child. For example, there are many ways you can make the building brick rocket game more educational:



> MATHS:

- Build a rocket alongside your child and count the number of bricks as you make it.
- Ask them how many more blocks they need. Ask them to guess how many they have used. Have they used more blue or white ones? Which is more and which is less?
- Refer to the bricks by their shapes (both 2D and 3D). "I need a cube not a cuboid." "Have you got a cone?"

> ENGLISH:

- Ask them to explain all the different parts of their rocket and how it works. Explain to them how your rocket works and all the special features on your rocket. See if they can explain how your rocket works to another person.
- Write labels - "Mummy's Rocket."
- Make up stories about where the rockets are going - pretend different parts of the house or room are alien planets - make up who lives there and what they look like and then draw the aliens to put on the pretend planets and write up the stories you make up together.
- Read the stories you made up at bedtime and read other space stories together for inspiration for the next time you play.

> SCIENCE:

- Find out more about space - using books and the internet. Where could your rocket go?
- See if you can find footage of real rockets going into space and scientists making rockets - are there any features you could add to your rocket?
- Do experiments at making 'real rockets' and see how far they can fly.

> ART:

- Make rockets using different objects - junk modelling or other construction toys - and make a fleet of starships.



These are just a few examples of how your intervention can elevate a play activity into an educational opportunity.



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What should they be learning?

But how do you know what your child should be learning and what level is appropriate?

Older children are taught in a more familiar way with lessons being planned around traditional subject areas such as English, Maths, Science, Art, Geography, and History.

Early years has the freedom to explore education in a completely different way. The curriculum is outlined in a document called The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework - often shortened to the EYFS Framework.

The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework

There are seven areas of learning.

The first three are called the Prime Areas and are the main focus of the Nursery Year and are seen as essential to having a good foundation for future education:

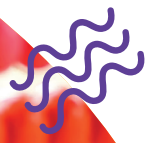
- **Communication and Language,**
- **Physical Development**
- **Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED).**

As the children develop during their Nursery Year the curriculum expands to include four more areas:

- **Literacy,**
- **Mathematics**
- **Understanding the World**
- **Expressive Arts and Design.**

The framework lists 17 Early Learning Goals over these seven areas which teachers use to assess the children's progress by the end of their Reception Year.

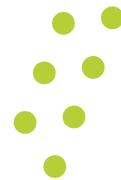
Early Years teachers use their experience to harness children's interests and enthusiasm while giving them new play opportunities to help them learn new skills to achieve these specific goals.



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A guide to how the play ideas database can help children work towards their early learning goals

Here is a chart which summarises the goals (the actual wording of the goals can be found on-line in the EYFS Framework) and gives suggestions of new play ideas and games that you can find on this website that you can enjoy with your child, but can also be used to help them to learn. Often it is just a matter of asking a few challenging questions or modelling a new skill or activity.

Communication and language

Early Learning Goal (ELG)	Description	Play ideas from MTTP app	Benefits these activities provide
ELG 1 Listening and Attention	Listen attentively and respond with comments and questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 questions • I went to the shop • Musical statues 	These games promote active listening – they show that they are paying attention by asking relevant questions, remembering other people’s answers or by listening to when the music stops.
ELG 2 Understanding	Follow instructions and ask how and why questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find the object • Follow my leader • Pairs • Simon says • Warmer, colder 	These activities need children to understand instructions, to ask questions to find out more information or to show understanding by making connections.
ELG 3 Speaking	Show awareness of the listener’s needs and can use past, present and future when talking.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating costumes for book characters • Make believe • Make masks • Make crowns • Nature café • Story telling stones • Pipe cleaner finger puppets 	Children always talk a lot when they play role play games. They copy stories, films, books and real-life situations. They will be more likely to use the past tense (“Once upon a time …”) when re-telling stories. When they play with others they have to listen and take note of what the others are saying and the roles that other children want to play.

Physical development

Early Learning Goal (ELG)	Description	Play ideas from MTTP app	Benefits these activities provide
<p>ELG 4 Moving and Handling</p>	<p>Show control and co-ordination and can move confidently and safely. They can handle equipment and tools (including pencils).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance assault course • Balloon tennis • Bat the rat • Bean bag throw • Jigsaw puzzles • Juggling • Mini Olympics • Make your own modelling clay • Throw bounce catch • Build a model 	<p>These activities promote either:</p> <p>Gross motor skills such as hand eye co-ordination, catching a ball, running, throwing accurately or</p> <p>Fine motor skills (using their hands) such as drawing, colouring in, jigsaw puzzles, construction toys, or using modelling clay.</p>
<p>ELG 5 Health and Self Care</p>	<p>Know about keeping healthy and can get dressed independently.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy food faces • Dressing up 	<p>Discuss what food is healthy and why while you are making the snack.</p> <p>Dressing up helps children to become more independent when getting changed in and out of clothes.</p>





Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED)

Early Learning Goal (ELG)	Description	Play ideas from MTTP app	Benefits these activities provide
ELG 6 Self Confidence and Self Awareness	Try new activities, have preferences, will talk in a familiar group about their ideas and will ask for help if they need it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talent show • Role play • Sock puppets 	Putting on a show and acting in front of others builds children's self-confidence. They can learn new skills and show them to the rest of the family in a 'talent show'. And then everyone can say what they liked best and why.
ELG 7 Managing Feelings	Able to talk about their feelings and behaviour and other people's. Able to follow rules, but also adapt to change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a picnic • Grandma's footsteps 	<p>When children role play using toys they often rehearse dealing with emotions and behaviour. If you join in you can model good ways of dealing with emotions such as anger, jealousy and empathy. For instance, you could say, "Teddy is very upset because he wants more cake." And then see how your child deals with it.</p> <p>It is good to play rule-based games so they learn that sometimes everyone has to follow the same rules. And that sometimes they will win and sometimes they will lose (and to learn how to deal with their emotions when they do).</p>
ELG 8 Making Relationships	Play with others, take turns, listen to other people's ideas. Sensitive to other people's feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paper puppets • Tell jokes • Things about me • What's the time Mr Wolf? • Please Mr Crocodile 	These are all games where they have to take turns or play collaboratively with others.

Literacy

Early Learning Goal (ELG)	Description	Play ideas from MTTP app	Benefits these activities provide
ELG 9 Reading	Read simple sentences. Use phonic knowledge to decode words and know some irregular words. Show understanding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple as ABC • Bag of words • Hangman • Reading • Pairs, pairs • Alphabet dice • Letter hunt 	<p>They are learning their alphabet (particularly the sound the letter makes and not the name of the letter).</p> <p>They need practice in recognising the written letter and their sounds (decoding) and then blending them together to make recognisable words - starting with three letter words with a vowel in the middle - such as mat, dog, hat etc.</p>
ELG 10 Writing	Use phonics knowledge to write words.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Magnetic letters • It's time to chalk • Glitter tray • Magic wand • Letter game • Body spellers • Illustration • I-Spy • One touch • Make anagrams 	<p>In order to write children need to break down the words that they hear into the individual letter sounds.</p> <p>Any games which help them listen closely to the sounds in words or to practice forming letters help them as they begin to write.</p>



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Maths

Early Learning Goal (ELG)	Description	Play ideas from MTTP app	Benefits these activities provide
<p>ELG 11 Numbers</p>	<p>Count from 1 – 20 and place numbers in order. Know which number is one more or one less. Add and subtract numbers below 10. Understand doubling, halving and sharing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ackee 123 • Air ball • Bingo • Killer • Number plate game • Snap • Board games • Magnetic numbers • I've got your number • Number songs • Dotty numbers • Rocket board game 	<p>Children should be able to recognise all numbers to 20 and place them in order. Knowing their 'Number Bonds to 10' is always helpful – simply which two numbers added together makes 10: 1+9, 2+8, 3+7 etc.</p> <p>It is good to make sure they understand what “One More” and “One Less” means and practice it with practical objects – it lays the foundation for understanding addition and subtraction. Practising using number lines (or counting around a Board Game is really valuable).</p> <p>Magnetic numbers model the numbers the right way round and many children at this age reverse their numbers when they write them down.</p>
<p>ELG 12 Shape, Space and Measure</p>	<p>Use everyday language to talk about size, weight, capacity, position, distance, time and money. Compare quantities and solve problems. Explore characteristics of shapes and describe them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Athletics • Building block bath • Coin rubbing • Exploring in the woods • Hokey pokey (positional language) • Pretend shopping • Water tea parties • Guinness Book of Records 	<p>This is all about comparing, measuring and describing things. You don't have to record anything or write it down. It is about talking.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which is tallest, longest, biggest etc. • Is the bottle full or empty? • How much money do you have? • Positional language – is it to your left, right, above? • What shape is it? How many sides? How many corners?



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Understanding the World

Early Learning Goal (ELG)	Description	Play ideas from MTTP app	Benefits these activities provide
ELG 13 People and Communities	Talk about past and present events in their lives and lives of family members. Know that they are not always the same as others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a scrap book • Back in the day 	This is the early foundation for history and geography. These activities help them to think about the past and differences between themselves and others through their own experiences and those of their close family members.
ELG 14 The World	Know about similarities and differences in places, objects, materials and living things. Observe living things and explain why changes happen.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blow bubbles • Bug hunt • Catapult paper airplane • Creating collages • Cress heads • Egg parachutes • Ice lollies • Ice cube boats • Leaf rubbing • Petal perfume • Spot the difference 	This is the early foundation for science. You can help them by focusing on change – what is changing, what does it look like and what is making the changes happen. For instance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has happened to the cress seed? Why is it sprouting? What does it need to grow? • Why has the juice we put into the containers turned hard when it went into the freezer? What does the freezer do?
ELG 15 Technology	Know that a range of technology is used and they can select and use technology for a purpose.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coding kits • Educational app based games 	Tech based activities such as coding can help children learn how to problem-solve as well as enhance their creativity.



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Expressive Arts and Design (EAD)

Early Learning Goal (ELG)	Description	Play ideas from MTTP app	Benefits these activities provide
<p>ELG 16 Exploring and Using Media and Materials</p>	<p>Sing songs, dance, make music (and experiment with ways of changing them). Experiment with colour, design, texture, form and function.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A ring o' roses • Beat to the rhythm • Nursery rhyme character • Ice cube boats • Play an instrument • Potato printing • Salt dough pottery • Singing • Fine motor squeezey bottle • Create your own picture • Spaghetti sensory play • Handprint animals • Junk model pets 	<p>This goal is about practising and learning new skills.</p> <p>Having the opportunity to play with art materials, instruments, dance, music, singing.</p> <p>Experimenting with mixing colours and how different materials feel and can be used.</p> <p>Junk modelling is a fantastic way to explore different media and helps with fine motor skills.</p>
<p>ELG 17 Being Imaginative</p>	<p>Use skills they have learnt to represent their own ideas – through art, design, dance, role-play and stories.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a den • Cloud game • Dining chair den • Make a bracelet • Paper puppets • Talent show • Playing hotels • Pretend post office • Toy tea party • Cardboard box TV • Designer! 	<p>Now they have learnt how to do things and make things, they can put their own spin on it.</p> <p>They can use their imagination to make things they like or re-tell favourite stories their way, or sing their own song.</p>

These are suggestions of games that you can play with your child and explain how you can use them to help in your child's continued learning, in addition to the work and activities that your teachers set for your child at home.

But it is just a start – when you start engaging in adult guided play, you will think of plenty of your own ideas. If you do, why not share them with us so that we can add them to our database for other children and parents to try? **Email us on getinvolved@maketime2play.co.uk**



Not all play has to have a goal

Although it is tempting to try and squeeze out as much educational goodness as possible from play, sometimes children should be left to their own devices to explore and understand their world, to have a go at things on their own and to work out solutions to problems without answers being given by adults.

This constant balance between the two types of play is addressed in the EYFS Framework. It says:

“There is an on-going judgement to be made by practitioners about the balance between activities led by children, and activities led or guided by adults.”

At that is the same at home.

But you know you have got the balance right if they are:

- 1. Playing and exploring** – being inquisitive and curious about their life and the world around them and being willing to have a go
- 2. Involved in Active Learning** – being interested, focused and paying attention – and keeping on trying!
- 3. Thinking** – making connections, having their own ideas, doing things their own way and problem solving when things don't work out.

And this is where you stand back, admire their positive attitude to learning and give your child time to enjoy undirected, free flow, child centred play.

To access the play ideas mentioned throughout this document, download the [FREE Make Time 2 Play app](#) on iOS and Android for more than 450 FREE play ideas.

