

The Play Well Project

Activity Cards and Resource Bags

Evaluation Report

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The Play Well Project Introduction

This report aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the “Play Well; Wellbeing through play” resource, which was developed by Play Scotland in collaboration with the Educational Psychology Service in Dundee.

The evaluation was part of a wider study concerning play based learning conducted by a 2nd year Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) undertaking an MSc programme in Educational Psychology at the University of Dundee. The impact of play on children’s social and cognitive development has been of great importance in the field of early education and child development in the past few decades, with play-based learning being the mandated pedagogy in the early years’ curriculum across several countries. Despite many well researched benefits of play on children’s development, little research has been conducted on the impact of play-based learning on the development of different competencies of social and emotional learning.

The main focus of this study was to explore the impact of a play intervention conducted at home and at school, across five competencies of social and emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, responsible decision making and relationship skills.

The results of the research showed that the intervention successfully supported children’s development across different competencies of social and emotional learning.



The impact of play

The impact of play on children’s social and cognitive development has been of great importance in the field of early education and child development in the past few decades (Guirguis, 2018). As reported by Pyle, Deluca and Danniels (2017) play-based learning is now the mandated pedagogy in the early years’ curriculum across several countries.

Multiple studies have shown different benefits of play on children’s development, including different types of play positively influencing children’s socioemotional development (Ashiabi, 2007; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Despite many well researched benefits of play on children’s development to date, little research has been conducted on the impact of play-based learning on the development of different competencies of social emotional learning (SEL).

What is social and emotional learning?

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) definition (2020), social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which all children, young people and adults gain and apply knowledge and skills that are necessary for the achievement of personal and collective goals, management of emotions, maintaining relationships, capacity for empathy and responsible decision making. CASEL (2020) identifies 5 Core Competencies of SEL:

- Self-management – capabilities to manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviours effectively in various situations and to achieve one’s goals.
- Responsible decision making – capabilities to make responsible and constructive choices about personal behaviour and social interactions across different contexts and situations.
- Relationship skills – capabilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships, to communicate effectively with others and to navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.

- Social awareness – capabilities to understand other perspectives and empathise with others, including those from different background and cultures.
- Self-awareness – capabilities to understand one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and their influence on behaviour across different contexts.

This makes SEL an integral part of education and human development, a process of developing of self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills that are essential in all aspects of people’s lives.



What is play?

There are a number of theorists who have written about play. Vygotsky believed that children could engage in pretend play when they began to separate what can be seen from what can be implied (Bodrova, Germeroth & Leong, 2013). By means of pretend play, a child can think about an object even when it is not present or evident (Smidt, 2009, as cited in Scharer, 2017). While playing, thought is separated from object and action starts from ideas, rather than from things: a piece of wood can be a doll, a stick becomes a horse. Vygotsky believed this was the first step for children in terms of developing higher mental functions and verbal thinking. (Scharer, 2017).

Froebel (1887) described play as the highest expression of development in childhood, emphasising that children had an innate ability to be curious and investigate the world through play. Montessori (1967) regarded play as child's work, while Piaget (1962) viewed it as a happy display of known actions. Albon (2001) saw play as a voluntary activity taking place within certain time and place limitations, following certain rules and giving a sense of joy. According to Robinson et al. (2018), there are similarities in how play has been viewed for decades. Theorists agree that children are curious and learn through the exploration of their environment, and that it is an innate, natural way for children to gather information. Therefore, while there is no simple definition of play (Hughes, 2010), there are several components that it is characterised by; it is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, pleasurable, non-literal and requires active participation.

Types of play

There are many types of play, however, developmental psychologists (Lockhart, 2010) identify four main types of child-initiated play: exploratory play, constructive play, dramatic play and games with rules, suitable for older children. Exploratory play refers to exploration of the properties of materials and tools, while constructive play refers to making things. Dramatic play revolves around acting out, creating scenarios, pretend situations and assuming various roles.

Why is play important?

There is a vast amount of research around the importance of children's play and its impact on learning and development, that spans across different fields. This evidence includes work in evolutionary and developmental psychology, anthropology, neuroscience and educational studies (Whitebread et al., 2017). The early years are particularly important for later development and wellbeing, with the brain growing extremely fast in the first years of a child's life, building a foundation for future learning and wellbeing, with more than one million new neural connections formed every second.

Furthermore, since children are 'hands on' learners (UNICEF, 2018), they gain new knowledge and abilities through interactions with objects and people around them. Play can also give children opportunities to utilise their creativity, while developing imagination, cognitive and social emotional skills. While playing, children can try new social skills, like sharing toys and working towards a common goal



(Ginsburg, 2021). Other abilities that play allows children to practise include decision making skills, conflict resolution, group work and leadership skills. Play also provides children with space where they can express their feelings and ideas and manage their emotions. Child initiated play also serves an important purpose in language and literacy skills development, providing children with opportunities to hear and practise language (Lockhart, 2010).

The Play Well Project

In recognition of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the transition support available to children starting primary school in 2020, and a growing need for additional focus on the development of social and emotional skills, the Play Well Project was piloted. The project aimed to improve health and social and emotional wellbeing in Primary 1 (P1) children across nine LA schools by:

- Creating a play based resource designed to support children's learning across school and home
- Engaging families in children's learning
- Providing all families with play packs, containing resources and prompts for activities to support children's learning through play at home

To that end, Play Scotland in collaboration with Educational Psychology Services in Dundee developed a resource that is designed to help parents' and carers' in supporting their children health and wellbeing through play. Funding was received from the Wellbeing Fund to purchase the resources. This report investigates the impact of the use of the 'Play Well Project' resources over a five month period at home, on children's development of social and emotional learning and aims to answer the following questions:

- a) Are all five core competencies of SEL supported equally by the 'Play Well Project' resources or are some areas more supported?
- b) How can providing parents with play resources and prompts on how to use them, increase their confidence in supporting the development of their children's SEL?
- c) How helpful did parents find the 'Play Well Project' resources in supporting their children's wellbeing?
- d) How can facilitating children's play-based learning at home improve their behaviour and engagement at school?

In order to answer these questions, qualitative research methods were used, including semi-structured interviews, observations and an anonymous survey to gather participants' data.



Introducing the Play Well Project activity cards and resources

Play Scotland, in collaboration with the Educational Psychology Service in Dundee, and a wider cohort of educators, developed 11 activity cards to go along with a pack of carefully chosen resources. Each pack included a teddy bear, bubbles, dice, sensory beads, a construction set, five wooden “people” and three bean bags. These were distributed to nine schools across the city, and were then distributed to individual parents enabling parents to have time to familiarise themselves with the resource and engage their children with the resources, using prompts from the activity cards. Due to the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that the majority of learning was taking place at home, the teacher taking part in the study utilised the resource during her online classes, giving all children additional opportunity and ideas to use the resource.

Evaluation of the impact of the Play Well Project

The evaluation was undertaken through use of interview questions for a semi-structured interview, mixed methods electronic survey and observation sheets. The purpose of the interview and the survey were largely to evaluate the resource and its impact on children’s performance, engagement and behaviour, while the latter aimed to explore the impact of the resource on children’s performance across the 5 competencies of SEL.

Delivery of the Play Well Project

The school received the ‘Play Well Project’ resources in early November 2020, which is when it was distributed to parents. The class teacher

participating in the study took the initiative to utilise the resource not only at home, but also in the classroom, and started to use it during classes. This continued through the second COVID-19 lockdown, which began at the end of December 2020. The children participating in the study were all P1 children. The researcher did not actively try to recruit participants who were disabled or whose first language was not English, however, those pupils were eligible to take part in the research, provided their parents were content to be involved. In the school focussed on in this study, 65 primary one children received the resource across three classes and used three different methods of engagement. The first class gave the resources to children straight away, the second class practised the activities all together in the classroom, while in the third class, with the teacher that participated in the study, they focussed on one resource and activity with children each week.



Responses from parents

The survey analysis from parents found that the resource was generally perceived as easy to use. **‘The suggestions for the play were well written, we enjoyed using them’.**

Parents enjoyed using the resource **‘Great ideas of what to do with your child! My little one became very attached to ‘teddy’ and uses him frequently for all sorts of play’.**

All children enjoyed using the resource **‘Throwing bags as well as balancing was the favourite activities. Can’t think of any activity that my child disliked’.**

Parents found that engaging their children was **‘easy’** and **‘very easy’.**

Parents found it helpful to have activities explained **‘I found it very helpful to have very well explained activities at hand for the times when I need to engage my child’.** **‘Great having the cards to engage with and to support parents’.**

Teacher’s evaluation

The interview with the class teacher showed that the resources had been well received by all parents. Having physical resources, instead of just descriptions of activities was perceived to be beneficial **‘one of the things that the parents have said about it was, that we had home a lot, maybe, leaflets about play, or ideas on paper. And that’s okay, but it kinda just gets popped in the bin or put to the side, but having the physical resource, made them want to use it more’.**

Children were observed to be very engaged with the resource. **‘The resource had really helped the children talk about feelings’.**

Children were able to use the resource for activities from cards, but were also able to use them in other ways **‘we had the activity cards, and all of the ideas on it, we could use that, but then the children were able to go beyond that themselves’.**

The activity packs and cards increased engagement during lockdown **‘So it was engaging them in the learning using... you know using those tools. So all the children, even though they were all at home, they all had the same thing, too. So I suppose it enhanced the engagement during lockdown, really enhanced that’.**

The provision of the same resources to all of the children promoted equality. Children responded well to having individual resources **‘To have in that common ground, everyone having the same bag, really, really benefited the children’.**

The bag and activity cards were seen as an effective tool **‘Simple, yet effective’ ‘Versatile’** and having them during lockdown was very beneficial, **‘having them at that time to go home, with home learning, really gave me an opportunity to use the resource because I was a little bit fearful that it would just be something that would be given home and forgotten about because we have so many other things to do’.**

Effectiveness seemed to be dependent upon the time put into utilising the resource and practising with the children, with the teacher who spent more time on the resource in class time feeling the children in their class benefited most.



The teacher reported that children's abilities to play and work together have improved, as well as their ability to reason, and the pack helped with transition back to school after lockdown.

The teacher observed that children's understanding of their feelings improved, and they had improved in their ability to recognise different emotions **'100% 100% Yeah, definitely.'** Through practicing the activities on the cards, children's self-regulation skills improved **'One of the parents had said that one of her children at home had got themselves in the state, and just lay down then started a teddy breather'.**

Conclusion

Play has long been viewed as an important mechanism through which children learn and experience the world around them (Whitebread et al., 2012; Lester & Russell, 2010; Ginsburg, 2021) and it may as well also cause changes in the brain, as shown through studies conducted on rats, where two hours of daily play predicted changes in rats' brain weight and efficacy (Yogman et al., 2016). However, there is not a lot of research showing evidence of the impact of play on the development of social and emotional learning. With that said, there are a number of studies that have shown positive outcomes of play-based interventions on young children's SEL. The results of a study by Koivula, Turja and Laakso (2020) with 11 Finnish children, showed that play-based story telling sessions positively promoted development of social awareness and problem-solving skills amongst participants. Another study conducted with approximately 110 Scottish children showed that play promoted self-regulation and negotiation skills, as well as providing opportunities for the development of self-awareness and self-confidence (Arnott, 2018).

Based on the observations of children conducted in school and at home, all children showed positive outcomes of the intervention across their confidence, emotional understanding and self-regulation, communication skills, attention, understanding, interactions with peers and the ability to express themselves. While not all children were impacted in the same way, they all showed progress in different ways; becoming more independent, improving their ability to express themselves and to self-regulate, becoming more empathetic, speaking of their feelings with more ease, and improving their ability to listen and to play with others.

The resource has also been proven to positively impact on children's engagement with their learning. Importantly, all the benefits to children's learning occurred through the means of activities that the children enjoyed and wanted to participate in, showing the true benefits associated with play.

The results of the survey showed that the majority of the participants found the resource helped them to feel more confident in supporting their children's SEL development. It is important to note however, that some of the parents indicated that they did not think of the development of different skills while using the resource with the children – they simply looked at it as an enjoyable activity to do with their child, which of course it was also designed to be. This might suggest that information to parents about the benefits of play-based learning should be more explicit, which may in turn increase the time spent engaging in play-based activities.



The diversity of different activities contained in the resource, and the ease with which they could be used, were also seen as a strength and could be contributing factors to increasing parents' confidence. It was **'very helpful to have very well explained activities at hand for the times when I need to engage my child'.**

Another strength observed by parents, which was reported by the teacher during the interview, was the fact that the resource contained not only descriptions of different activities to use, but also physical prompts for children to engage with. These were also affordable and easy to replace if they run out (e.g. bubbles could be replaced with water and washing up liquid). Having a physical resource meant parents could engage their children more easily, as they did not have to go and buy or look for any of the resources themselves, it was all already there in the pack. While having physical prompts probably did not increase parent's confidence in supporting their children's SEL by itself, it led to an increased engagement in the resource, which in turn contributed to an increase in confidence.

In general, the majority of the parents participating in the study found the resource helpful in terms of supporting their children's wellbeing, with one parent commenting: **'Definitely the health and wellbeing side'.** During the interview with the teacher, she also stated she received very positive feedback from parents who told her the children now find it easier to talk about their feelings. One parent also added that her child would use the resource for comfort and engage their younger sibling with it, a sibling who now thinks this is what they are going to do when they go to school as well. Another parent told the teacher about how her child used the teddy bear provided to self-regulate at home, by lying

down on the floor with the teddy and having a 'teddy breather' as practiced at school.

It was difficult to measure how facilitating children's play-based learning at home improved their behaviour and engagement at school as the majority of the learning took place at home, due to lockdown. **However, the teacher did state that having the resource in place was definitely a contributing factor in supporting children's engagement and positive behaviour during classes. The resource has also helped with children's transition back to school, following the lockdown, making it much easier for them to cope with the change.**

It was also stated that all the children loved the resource and were very engaged with it, particularly since they **'respond well to anything they can touch and feel'.** Having a physical resource was therefore not only beneficial for helping to support parents when using the resource, but also in terms of increasing children's engagement with it. Since the children were using the resource prior to lockdown in school, and then both with their parents and with the teacher during online learning, their engagement with learning during lockdown increased, as they were not only already familiar with the resource, but also had the physical prompts with them at home **'So it was engaging them in the learning using... you know using those tools. So all the children, even though they were all at home, they all had the same thing, too. So I suppose it enhanced the engagement during lockdown, really enhanced that'.**

Overall, the resource proved to be of great benefit for the children, supporting them at school and at home over lockdown.



While the results certainly showed the resource successfully supported children's development across different competencies of SEL, there were a few themes identified during the analysis of the data that stood out among the rest. Having a physical item for children to use, as opposed to just the activity cards, was discussed previously, however this was important part in terms of increasing the engagement with the resource, both for children and their parents. Self-regulation and being able to speak about feelings were amongst the skills that were most improved across all the children in the class. It is likely the effect of the resource would not be as strong, if the physical items were not there, as they would likely not be as engaged. Another aspect of the resource, which seemed to increase engagement, was the fact that all children had exactly the same resource, which eliminated any elements of envy, in terms of anyone wanting someone else's resource. This was seen as an important benefit, as the children could all feel a sense of ownership of their resource and could engage with it on daily basis.

As the resource proved to support children's transitions very well, certain aspects of it could be utilised as transition tools. Moreover, the resource shows that children's transitions can be impacted not only by activities undertaken at school but also those undertaken at home, which can also inform the methods used by the school to support children's transitions.

Another implication for practice comes from the finding that the resource provided engaged not only the children it was given to, but also their siblings, meaning entire families engaged with it. This is important, as it shows that a resource like this has the capacity to support young children to develop different skills across SEL before they go to school. A sibling of one of the pupils using the resource reportedly engaged with it often and assumed that this is what she would do at school as well, which got her excited about going

to school. By providing families with resources like the 'Play Well Project' resources we can help and engage whole families in supporting children's development. It does seem however, that the high level of engagement observed across families was supported by the fact that it contained physical, easy to engage with resources as well as prompts. Going forward, if a similar resource was to be developed, this should be kept in mind, as it made the activities more accessible for families, and this might not be the case if they were only given activity cards.

All of the children participating in this study have been said to show progress across different abilities as a result of using the 'Play Well Project' resources. In fact, whole families have been impacted, as the resource proved to be engaging children, their parents and their siblings. The resource has also been praised for its accessibility and clearly set and explained activities that came with prompts, which facilitated children's engagement with the resource.

As it was stated by the teacher who participated in the research, the use of the 'Play Well Project' resources have been extremely helpful in supporting children in her class throughout the pandemic and lockdown, providing her with a transition tool she could use when children had to learn from home. This could potentially be a very important implication for all schools in Scotland, who could utilise a similar resource to support their children during a difficult period of time, when in-class attendance is not always a possibility, but also as a more generally useful resource, to build relationships between home and school and to engage families in learning.



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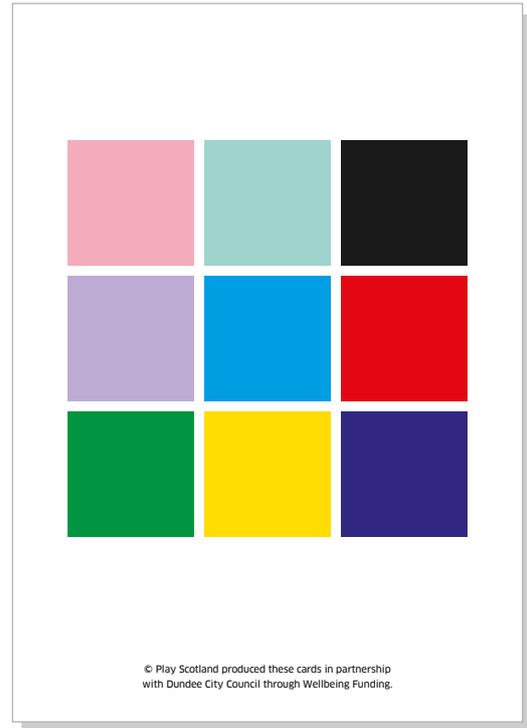
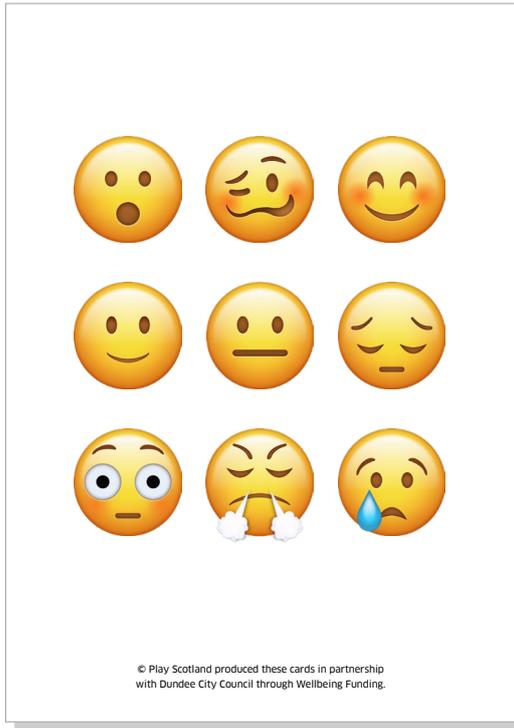
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