



What do children learn at  
kindy?



Welcome to the Aspley East Kindergarten and Preschool community. Aspley East Kindy is a special place in our local community having cared for and educated children for over 50 years. With such a long history, our kindergarten has developed a rich culture of teaching and learning that we believe make Aspley East Kindy the special place that it is. This culture has developed over many years of engagement with early childhood research, engagement in professional networks and in partnership with the wishes of children and their families. The teachers have worked together to make this publication in order to help you to understand some of the ways in which your child will learn during their kindy year.

Each section of this publication is headed with a question which represents things that many parents have asked us when enrolling their child in kindergarten. These questions are not exhaustive and there will always be more. We hope that this publication works to begin a conversation, between yourselves as parents, between yourselves and the kindergarten staff and in the local community. Please use the information contained here as a means through which to ask more questions in order to understand how your child learns when they come to kindy.

We believe that ways of learning in the early childhood years are rich and deserve to be celebrated and recognised in their own right. We believe that learning at kindy is not only not only about preparing children for school, but about preparing children for life.

## **What do children learn at kindy?**

This question is often at the forefront of parent's thinking when enrolling their child in kindy. It is also a question that the teachers have spent much time considering, re-considering and questioning. The question of what children learn is an important one, as the answer shapes what it is that teachers do with children during the time that they are at kindergarten. In order to answer this question, it seemed important to consider another one first; that is:

## **‘what *should* children learn at kindy?’**

This might at first seem obvious, the children should learn what the curriculum says, right? While there are a number of policy documents developed by our Federal and State Governments (The Early Years Learning Framework, C&K’s Building Waterfalls & the National Quality Framework) that inform teaching and learning at the kindy, these are not the only informers of curriculum. Children can and do learn so much more than what is contained in curriculum documents. So how then do we decide what children should learn while they are at kindy?

The answer is that we (the teachers) do not consider ourselves to be the holders of all knowledge, therefore, we do not decide in isolation what children should learn. We draw on a wide range of influences such as: children themselves, parents and families, other teachers, our community as well as the above mentioned learning guidelines. These influences give us information about what is considered to be important for children to learn. We use these influences to make decisions about what experiences we might provide for the children.

## **Will my child be prepared for prep after coming to kindy?**

Our kindergarten holds a strong position on the role of kindergarten and each child’s right to experience being a member of a community and learning within that community for its own sake, not only for its role in preparation for formal schooling. Kindergarten is not solely about “preparation for prep”, kindergarten is about preparation for life. Parents can feel reassured that the learning frameworks used to inform the educational programs were designed with both children’s rights and school preparation in mind. Therefore, through engagement at kindergarten your child will develop a range of knowledge and skills that will prepare them not only for entry into school, but for the rest of their lives. A little further on, you will be able to read about the kindergarten’s position on the learning of ‘letters and numbers’ while at kindy.

## How do children learn at kindy?

Research tells us that children in the very early years learn most successfully through play and engagement in relevant and meaningful experiences with interested others. We understand learning to be a collaborative process, therefore the teachers role at kindy is to create the kind of physical and temporal environment in which children can engage in experiences that help them to understand the world around them.

When you think about learning, do you immediately have an image of a teacher at the front of a classroom pointing to a board? At AEK we think about learning in a different way. Imagine this...

*A child has been watching bees in the flower bed for the last few weeks. The teacher has noticed this interest and provides a book about bees. On this particular day, the teacher sits close by the flower bed and watches alongside the child. The child notices the teacher's presence and says "why do the bees have fluffy bodies?" The teacher knows the evolutionary purpose of this fuzz, but decides not to give the child the answer right away. The teacher says to the child "why do you think?" The child says "maybe it's because they are cold?" The teacher says "that is a really good idea, I wonder if bees do feel the cold?" The teacher knows that the joy of learning is often in the unfolding process of discovery. To give the child the answer would be to rob them of the opportunity to wonder and theorise. Later in the day, the teacher looks through the fact book with the child and they discover that the fluff on a bees body serves both an insulating and pollen gathering function.*



## **What about letters and numbers?**

'Will my children learn letters and numbers?' is a question that is commonly asked when starting kindy. It is not possible to definitively answer this question as each child's acquisition of literacy and numeracy will depend on a number of factors. The answer to this question is also complicated because it depends on:

-The child's individual developmental path. The scope of development of children aged 3-5 is very broad. Some children will be ready for learning to write their name during the kindy year, some will not. This variance, unless impacted by a disability or learning disorder is nothing to be concerned about. Despite the misinformation and common assumptions, there is no mandated requirement that a child be able to write their name before beginning school.

-Your definition of ABC and 123. Literacy and numeracy encompasses many processes of language, of which recognising the letters of the alphabet and numerals is just one tiny piece.

-Your definition of teaching. When you think of teaching, what usually comes to mind is a teacher out the front of the class. This type of instruction is just one method of teaching. Remember from the definition of teaching above, that imparting knowledge can occur during a conversation in the sandpit, just as readily as it can when the teacher sits with the whole class. In fact, most deep learning in kindergarten does not occur during 'mat time' but rather in the deep engagement and conversation that happens when children and teachers engaging in meaningful play and other experiences.

-Your definition of learning. Being able to say the names of alphabet letters and numbers is a skill that children can learn by rote, however this does not necessarily mean that the child has understanding about what those letters or numbers mean. This deeper level of knowledge and understanding does not come from 'drill and skill' rote teaching, but comes from engaging with

books and numbers in real ways, such as reading stories and counting real objects in contexts of play. Kindy offers many open ended toys such as blocks, playdough and paint because they provide so many different types of opportunities for learning, not just letters and numbers, but a wide range of concepts. These concepts will be learned at different stages, depending on each child's individual developmental readiness.



Becoming literate and numerate are important skills needed to function in the world and the foundations of these skills are laid during the kindy year. In fact, studies show that the basis of these skills are even formed when babies are in the womb! At AEK we recognise letter and number knowledge as but a small fraction of the complexity of things that children learn while being at kindy and a fraction of the things that children need to learn about the world. Your child will learn an infinite range of things when coming to kindy. Some of these things will be tangible, like learning to write their name. Some will be less obvious, but no less important, such as learning to be a good friend, learning to solve problems, to persist in the face of difficulty and determination, just to name a few. If you take the time to watch your child in play, you will see that they can in fact learn very complicated skills like the physics of making a block building stand up or philosophical interpretations of life and death.

Letter and number knowledge are not the only, or indeed the most important elements of literacy and numeracy. The focus on discrete acts of learning letter and number names can be problematic as it tends to turn focus away from the less tangible aspects of literacy and numeracy such as oral language and understanding what numbers really mean.

### **How do children learn when they play?**

Play is a term that is ubiquitous with children, but knowledge about the important role of play in learning is scant. While research on brain development is in its infancy, it is believed that play shapes the structural design of the brain. We know that secure attachments and stimulation are significant aspects of brain development; play provides active exploration that assists in building and strengthening brain pathways. Play creates a brain that has increased 'flexibility and improved potential for learning later in life' (Lester & Russell, 2008, p. 9). Young children's play allows them to explore, identify, negotiate, take risks and create meaning. The intellectual and cognitive benefits of playing have been well documented. Children who engage in quality play experiences are more likely to have well-developed memory skills, language development, and are able to regulate their behaviour, leading to enhanced school adjustment and academic learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2005).

Play-based learning is described in the EYLF as 'a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they actively engage with people, objects and representations' (EYLF, 2009, p. 46). The intrinsically motivating and satisfying nature of play is the reason why it is considered such a powerful vehicle for learning.

Play is not simply frivolous activity, yet is also a term that is filled with contradictions. Play is serious yet not serious. Play is both trivial and profound. Play is imaginative and spontaneous but also bound by rules. Research tells us that play is a profoundly educative activity which can generally be described as:

- activity that is carried out with a particular motivation and mental attitude
- generally self-chosen and self-directed – what one wants to do as opposed to being obliged to do
- an activity where means are more important than ends – process is more important than product
- has a structure that comes from the mind of the players
- is imaginative, non-literal and mentally removed from ‘real life’
- it involves being active, alert and engaged, not stressed or coerced

Research evidence points to the role of play in children’s development and learning across cultures (Shiple, 2008). Many believe that it is impossible to disentangle children’s play, learning and development. Children do not play at one point and learn at another; the processes are intertwined and often elude capture. That playing the children are doing all day IS learning. They are not interspersing small moments of learning with long periods of play. They are learning ALL the time.



Part of the problem with the term play is also that it is often placed in a binary relationship with terms often associated with schooling, such as instruction. So it goes play vs. learning. The problem with this association is that play is often placed in a hierarchical relationship with other types of learning such as

didactic learning (direct instruction of facts and skills). It is then assumed that play is a lesser form of learning. These assumptions lead to the belief that play is frivolous and therefore subservient to 'real learning'. We know this not to be the case and therefore prioritise play as the primary context for learning at kindy.

### **What do the teachers do?**

With the previous section in mind, you might be wondering what the role of the teacher is, if play is the primary vehicle for learning. Understanding the role of the teacher in our kindergarten requires letting go of the notion that learning only occurs when the teacher instructs. Given our understandings about the educative potential of play, it might be natural to assume that the role of the teacher then, is superfluous, relegated to simply providing a safe environment. While we believe that children can and do demonstrate high levels of capability to direct their own learning, we also believe in the importance of the relationship between teachers and peers to enhance learning. We do not believe that the teacher is the centre of the program, rather the teacher is but one piece of a puzzle which is not complete without children, the environment and parents. At Aspley East Kindy the teachers provide the *conditions* in which learning can flourish. Some of the ways in which the teachers do this are:

Setting up interesting and inviting environments

Providing resources to further interests

Supporting social relationships and social problem solving

Facilitating the development of peer to peer learning relationships

Prompting new thinking and ideas

Asking children what they want to know about

Help children learn how to reflect on their own learning and figure out what they want to learn

Watching what children are interested in and build learning experiences that extend and engage their interests

### **What *do* children learn at kindy?**

The kindergarten programs are guided by EYLF, Building Waterfalls and the NQF. These documents are frameworks that guide the program with learning outcomes that are broad and aspirational rather than narrow and prescriptive. This broad focus of learning outcomes for kindergarten means that our programs are not built around the acquisition of isolated skills, but on the making of meaning and acquisition of knowledge and dispositions for learning.

At school you have a curriculum which dictates the content within each subject area that will be taught. At kindy, we have a framework for learning which includes guidance for a national approach to principles and practices of teaching and broad, flexible learning outcomes. The framework is implemented in ways that are unique to each particular early childhood context and classroom. The outcomes from the Early Years Learning Framework are not prescriptive, rather they are aspirational. They describe the types of learners that we hope children will be during their early childhood years. There is no onus for these outcomes to be achieved by the end of kindy, rather the outcomes provide broad guidance and support for children's learning.

*Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting. ~Ivan Illich*

For learning at kindy, this means that instead of delivering small pieces of information in separate subject areas, we provide broad, rich and meaningful play experiences for children in which they can explore their developing ideas, curiosities and questions about the world around them.

## **Relationships are at the centre of the programs**

At the centre of the kindergarten philosophy is the belief that relationships are key to learning and living. We believe that learning occurs in the context of rich and meaningful relationships. With this in mind, our programs are designed around the development and maintenance of strong relationships with and between staff, parents and children.

You will see this philosophical belief in practice as the teachers work to develop meaningful relationships with children and families from our first orientation, right through to the final transition to school. The teachers aim to get to know the children on a very deep level in order to understand how they go about learning, what they know, what they don't know, what they wonder about and what really 'makes them tick'. With this knowledge and with the unique insights from each child's parents, we make predictions about how we might support the development of their learning and plan the environment and experiences accordingly.



We hope that this booklet about learning at Aspley East Kindy has given you some information that you might have been wondering about, but hopefully also some more questions. Please use this information as the beginning of a conversation and ongoing relationship with your child's teacher during your child's kindy year at Aspley East Kindergarten.

Barblett, L. (2016). What is play-based learning?  
<http://thespoke.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/play-based-learning/>

