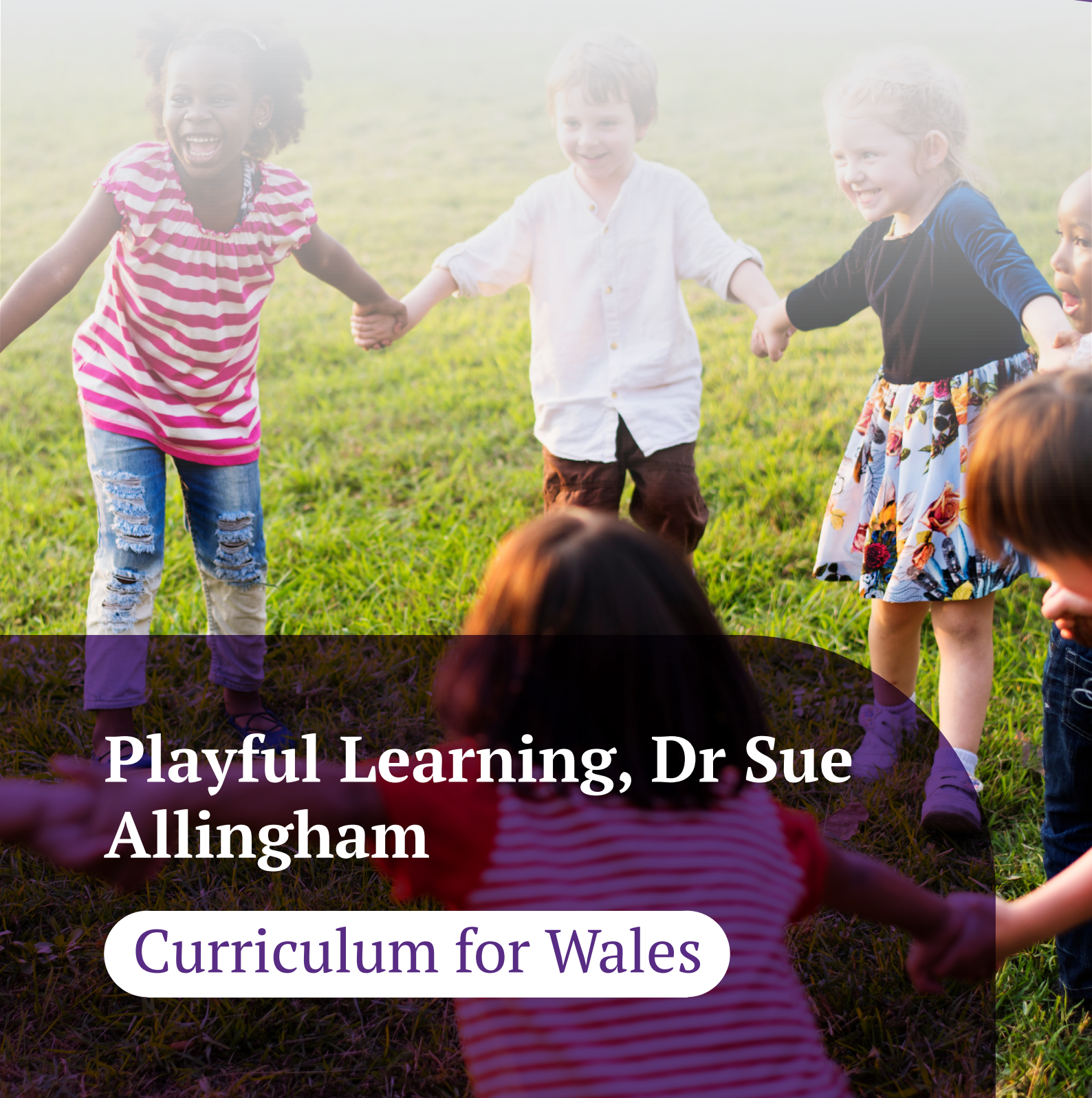




**Cymru**  
National Day Nurseries Association

# Factsheet



## Playful Learning, Dr Sue Allingham

Curriculum for Wales



## Playful Learning, Dr Sue Allingham

Dr Sue Allingham called her consultancy 'Early Years Out of the Box' after a conversation with a friend. Reflecting on the increasing culture of tick boxes and labelling children, the friends agreed that it was limiting and prevented children being able to develop their potential to think and learn.

As an independent consultant, author and trainer, Sue is known for her practical style of working through coaching, mentoring, modelling, training and working alongside teams. Her interests in teaching and learning have led to work on emotional and physical environments that will support informed teaching and learning.

This work has recently led to her being trained and accredited in the Brain-SET (Survival, Emotions, Thinking) approach. This approach is rooted in early brain development and has added a new dimension to her work.

Every child is entitled to a developmentally informed learning environment, and this means understanding why *play* is so important.

### So how does 'play' equal 'learning'?

*"We should model a **joyful approach to learning**, and encourage and support children's natural curiosity, making best use of the teachable moments that occur naturally as we observe or engage in their play."*

(Enabling adults, A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings page eight)

Working with the youngest children we often use the word 'play', but how often do we reflect on what that means in our practice and provision? And how often do we have to justify to other people why 'play' is vital to our work?

The aim of this resource is to underpin and inform thinking on what 'play' is, why it is crucial to early childhood play, learning and care (ECPLC), and how it looks, is developed, and can be explained in our settings.

### The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

*Article 31 (leisure, play and culture) Every child has the right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities*

The right of all children to play is enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This Convention was adopted in 1989 and has been ratified by all countries with the exception of the United States and Somalia.

Although this definition does not explicitly state a 'joyful approach to learning' it is implied in the statement.

'Play' is a small word that covers so much.

## What do we mean by the word 'play'?

*"Play is indeed the child's work, and the means whereby he grows and develops."*

*(Isaacs, 1929)*

It is difficult for many adults to understand the correlation of work and play. So we need to have a clear definition ready when we are asked.

Key components of play are –

- That it is active – this could be physically, mentally or both
- That it is engaging – the player/s are absorbed and involved in what they are doing so that they are not easily distracted
- That it is challenging – in a positive way as in an interesting thing to solve or work out
- That it enables the child/ children to have agency to make decisions
- That there is enough time for children to become completely involved in what they are doing.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi developed a concept of 'flow' which he defined as necessary for optimum completion of a task. This can also be used to define 'play'.

He describes 'flow' as having eight characteristics:

1. Complete concentration on the task
2. Clarity of goals and reward in mind and immediate feedback
3. Transformation of time (speeding up/slowing down of time)
4. The experience is intrinsically rewarding, has an end itself
5. Effortlessness and ease
6. There is a balance between challenge and skills
7. Actions and awareness are merged, losing self-conscious rumination
8. There is a feeling of control over the task.

<https://bit.ly/FlowCharacteristics>

So often play is underestimated until it is realised that it is crucial to every stage of development – both brain development and physical development are supported and added to by play. If we use the words underlined above when we are asked to define 'play' then we can move the listener away from the idea that it is a frivolous activity towards the more informed viewpoint, from Susan Isaacs quoted above.

## How do we use play to underpin and develop learning?

With a clear definition of 'play' it then becomes easier to demonstrate how play is used to underpin and develop learning.

Professor Tina Bruce writes –

*“Play is about wallowing in ideas, feelings and relationships and the prowess of the physical body.”*

<https://bit.ly/FroebelianApproach>

She goes on to tell us -

- During their free flowing play children use the technical prowess, mastery and competence they have developed to date
- They are confident and in control
- Play shows adults what children already know and have already learnt more than it introduces new learning.

This reflects the list of key components and means that we have to understand what our role in play is.

## What is your role as the enabling adult?

*“When practitioners understand the crucial role of sensitive periods in facilitating early brain development, they can think more critically about their planning of the environment and what changes can be made to maximise each child’s learning experience.”*

(Conkbayir, M. 2017 page 18)

As ‘enabling adults’ we are told that we must –

- ‘Model a joyful approach’
- ‘Encourage and support natural curiosity’
- Make best use of ‘teachable moments’ that occur naturally.

This means that we must provide an environment in which these things can happen through our practice, provision and pedagogy. Understanding how play looks and works means that we are enabling children to develop the skills of executive functioning – these will form some of the ‘teachable moments’ that we observe.

*“Just as an air traffic control system at a busy airport safely manages the arrivals and departures of many aircraft on multiple runways, the brain needs this skill set to filter distractions, prioritize tasks, remember rules and goals, and control impulses. These skills are crucial for learning and development.”*

[developingchild.harvard.edu](https://developingchild.harvard.edu)

## What is the role of the child?

Whose play agenda is it? To maximise the learning experience of the child, we need to remember that they have agency too. Reflect on the words highlighted so far in this factsheet – how are the decisions and ideas of the children acted on and exemplified in your setting?

How does your provision demonstrate to an observer that the thinking of the children has informed and made an impact on -

- Challenge
- Application
- Vocabulary
- Knowledge and skills.

How are the children included in the evaluations of what happens?

### *“The Dignity of Children’s Play*

*Adults have occupations. Children have play. Adults want to be taken seriously and respected for what they do. So do children. Play is as purposeful and important to them as any adult endeavour. Play is the place in the child’s life in which he is the decision maker and the problem solver.*

*When adults take play seriously, they also take the child seriously and find opportunity not only to communicate meaningfully but also to afford the child the dignity so conspicuously absent in so many of his interactions with the adult world.*

*We provide visible opportunities for play, so why don’t our routines enable it?”*

(Michael Gramling 2015 The Great Disconnect in Early Childhood Education pp88-89)

Common questions on ‘play’...

1. Can it happen in the classroom?
2. If so, what does it look like?
3. What does it require? Resources?
4. Is play purposeful if there is no adult involved?
5. Does it matter if what is happening is not obvious to the observer?

The answers to these questions are –

1. Yes, play can happen anywhere at any time
2. It has become clear throughout this document that the shape and form of play will be unique to the time, place and child/ children involved
3. To be enabled to play no resources are required other than the time to become involved in something joyful and fascinating. A stick and some mud can be the

most important resource ever in that moment, there is no need to set up 'activities' or buy expensive toys

4. Adult involvement in play is only purposeful if they are invited in and commit to the terms, rules, and roles designated by the children. To be fully engaged the adult must not have preconceived idea or direct the play. Their interactions must not be leading or asking closed questions
5. It will not always be clear what is happening or why as the agenda has been set by the child. In this way we must be very careful how 'teachable moments' are decided, and how the child/children lead the decision. In this way the role of the observer must involve listening, noticing and only interacting if invited to. It is not for us to judge or assume what is happening. For example, an observer might note that a particular child always plays the role of the family dog in Home Corner. This may concern an untrained eye as an assumption might be made that this role is not important and the other children are not seeing the child as significant or part of the play. Whilst this might be the situation, it is also possible that the role of the dog is actually pivotal within this group and is vital to the Home Corner play.

*"Children's learning has personal meaning and content. It can follow unexpected trajectories. Children's ways of learning and knowing involve innovative thinking and thoughtful problem solving. Children's searches for relevant information show a connection with intellectual subject matter. This connection differs from the linear progressions of school-subject learning that might be present in school readiness expectations."*

(Hedges, H. 2022. Children's Interests, Inquiries and Identities. Routledge p177)

It is the role of the knowledgeable and listening adult, the enabling adult, to understand what has been before and what must happen now for future learning to embed.

As Tina Bruce tells us -

- Play is an integrating mechanism which brings together everything the child has been learning, knows and understands
- It is rooted in real experience that it processes and explores
- It is self-healing in most situations and brings an intellectual life that is self-aware, connected to others, community and the world beyond
- Early childhood play becomes a powerful resource for life both in the present and the future.

<https://bit.ly/FroebelianApproach>

## Conclusion

So what is 'playful learning'? Although the word 'play' is often used, and misused, it is less often considered seriously as a vehicle for teaching and learning.

To finish here are some powerful words to use when explaining, underpinning and exemplifying why 'play' is a vital component to our work –

Play is:

- ✓ A release
- ✓ Challenging
- ✓ Emotional
- ✓ Enabling
- ✓ Engaging
- ✓ Exploratory
- ✓ Joyful\*
- ✓ Physical
- ✓ Processing
- ✓ Reenacting
- ✓ Reflecting
- ✓ Roleplaying
- ✓ Solitary
- ✓ Teamwork.

The list is endless and you will be able to add many more using this document as your starting point.

But above all, **play is integral to learning**

\*N.B. It is important to note that play is not always joyful. For example, children might use play to process difficult emotions, leading to scenarios that may seem sad or upsetting. You should refer to your safeguarding and well-being policies and procedures in these cases.

*"The environment you construct around you and the children also reflects this image you have about the child. There's a difference between the environment that you are able to build based on a preconceived image of the child and the environment that you can build that is based on the child you see in front of you — the relationship you build with the child, the games you play."*

(Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins by Loris Malaguzzi)

*"We were taught to say that play is the work of children. But, watching and listening to them, I saw that play was nothing less than Truth and Life"*

(Vivian Gussin Paley The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter p17)

## References

- Isaacs, S. (1929) The Nursery Years. London: Routledge

## Further support and resources

- **Play and play-based learning** (online playlist), Welsh Government: <https://bit.ly/3YHr22G>
- **Foundation learning vlog on effective pedagogy**, Welsh Government: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFILnIUHGIE>
- **Hwb Toolkit: Schematic Development and the Curriculum for Funded Non-maintained Nursery Settings**: <https://bit.ly/SchematicDevelopment>
- **Schematic development: Noticing and supporting the repeated patterns of behaviour in children's play** (online playlist), Welsh Government: <https://bit.ly/3CjgbEC>





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# Factsheet

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We are the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. We provide information, training and advice to support nurseries and the 250,000 people who work in them to deliver world-class early learning and childcare.

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