

A Froebelian approach

Empowering learning: play, symbols and creativity

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Contents



This is an interactive document

The top toolbar and contents buttons allow you to navigate through the different sections of the guide.

Froebelian principles

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) was the inventor of kindergarten and a pioneer of early childhood education and care. Froebel's work and writing changed the way we think about and value early childhood.

Froebel's ideas were considered revolutionary in the 1850s. The principles of his work continue to challenge and be relevant to modern mainstream early years educational practice.

Unity and connectedness

Everything in the universe is connected. The more one is aware of this unity, the deeper the understanding of oneself, others, nature and the wider world. Children are whole beings whose thoughts, feelings and actions are interrelated. Young children learn in a holistic way and learning should never be compartmentalised for everything links.

Autonomous learners

Each child is unique and what children can do rather than what they cannot, is the starting point for a child's learning. Children learn best by doing things for themselves and from becoming more aware of their own learning. Froebelian educators respect children for who they are and value them for their efforts. Helping children to reflect is a key feature of a Froebelian education.

The value of childhood in its own right

Childhood is not merely a preparation for the next stage in learning. Learning begins at birth and continues throughout life.

Relationships matter

The relationships of every child with themselves, their parents, carers, family and wider community are valued. Relationships are of central importance in a child's life.

Creativity and the power of symbols

Creativity is about children representing their own ideas in their own way, supported by a nurturing environment and people. As children begin to use and make symbols they express their inner thoughts and ideas and make meaning. Over time, literal reflections of everyday life, community and culture become more abstract and nuanced.

The central importance of play

Play is part of being human and helps children to relate their inner worlds of feelings, ideas and lived experiences taking them to new levels of thinking, feeling, imagining and creating and is a resource for the future. Children have ownership of their play. Froebelian education values the contribution of adults offering 'freedom with guidance' to enrich play as a learning context.

Engaging with nature

Experience and understanding of nature and our place in it, is an essential aspect of Froebelian practice. Through real life experiences, children learn about the interrelationship of all living things. This helps them to think about the bigger questions of the environment, sustainability and climate change.

Knowledgeable and nurturing educators

Early childhood educators who engage in their own learning and believe in principled and reflective practice are a key aspect of a Froebelian approach. Froebelian educators facilitate and guide, rather than instruct. They provide rich real life experiences and observe children carefully, supporting and extending their interests through 'freedom with guidance'.

Find out more about a Froebelian approach to early childhood education at froebel.org.uk



Introduction

This pamphlet is designed to support educators who are interested in understanding young children's play, their symbolic representations and ways to nurture creativity in early childhood education.

Twelve features of play are threaded through the pamphlet and draw on work I have developed over many years (Bruce 1991, Bruce 2020). These chime with Froebel's writings and connect with research literature.

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) realised the powerful contribution play makes to learning in early childhood. It helps children to reflect on their real-life experiences. It opens up possibilities for children to become finders, sharers and makers of symbols. Play gives insights into children's experiences of cultural contexts through which they connect with others, nature and the wider world.

A symbol represents something or someone. It helps children and adults to hold onto experiences and to make meaning that does not depend on the present. It reminds us about past experiences, and it helps us to imagine the future. Play, symbolic representation and creativity are interconnected in important ways.

"Play is the highest level of child development. It is the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling, an expression which his inner life requires.... It needs to be cherished and encouraged by parents, for in his free choice of play a child reveals the future life of his mind to anyone who has insight into human nature." (Froebel in Lilley 1967 p. 83-84).



Fig. 1a and 1b: 'Where can I fit?' Playing with an idea

"The play of this time, as already indicated, is not playfulness: it is highly serious and of deep significance."

Froebel in Brodbeck, forthcoming

First-hand experiences

Play feature 1

First-hand experience enables the inner drive babies and young children have to explore, manipulate and find out.

From birth, parents and carers can provide babies with first-hand experiences. First-hand experience is central to Froebel's thinking about play. This is because children bring their real-life experiences into their play. They might be placed to sleep under trees, seeing the leaves dancing above; indoors, a mobile symbolising birds might hang above their cradle. They might splash in puddles in the park, or kick leaves into piles in the autumn. They might help to cook a meal or bake cakes and take one they have made to an elderly neighbour.

From the beginning, babies grasp, suck and reach for objects. Gathering careful observations, Froebel found that babies love to play with a ball. His first Gift was a set of six soft spheres in the colours of the rainbow, (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet) on strings which can be dangled for a baby to hit, or to roll and small enough to hold. After the soft balls of Gift 1, babies were introduced to the wooden hard ball which was part of Gift 2. This shows his 'law of opposites'.



Fig. 2: Picking up stones and putting them in a basket is a typical first-hand experience for toddlers as they become increasingly mobile

Seeing a ball as symbolic of the baby holding the whole world in their hand reflects Froebel's concept of Unity.

Froebel believed that every stage in human life was important in its own right within a lifelong process of becoming. He believed that the whole journey of our lives takes different interconnected Forms. These involve everyday **Life**, such as family play with the ball. There is **Beauty** in the rainbow colours and spherical shape, and there is the hint at future **Knowledge** about how rainbows emerge when there is rain with sunshine.

In Fig. 4 the child is pleased to have found another sphere to put beside the larger one and is showing this to the adult who comments 'You have found another sphere!'. Using a wide vocabulary in a meaningful context for the child helps their language development.

"Babies are not yet talking but they still 'tell' us what is important to them and what they have found interesting to explore."

Louis 2022, p. 28



Fig. 3 and 4: A toddler playing with the soft spheres (Froebel's first Gift) and another playing with hard spheres (as in Froebel's second Gift). As children experience contrasts they are introduced to Froebel's 'law of opposites'

When they can sit, babies will sometimes spend a long time playing with a Treasure Basket developed by the Froebelian Elinor Goldschmied (Goldschmied and Jackson 1994). The basket is filled with everyday objects and natural materials, such as a wooden spoon, wooden cotton reel, lemon, pebble, flannel, ribbon small enough for a sitting baby's hand to pick up, hold and suck. What is in the basket inevitably reflects the symbols of the culture in which the baby is growing up.

There are times to talk and show babies objects and times to give babies opportunities to experience without distraction. This needs a companion who stays quietly alongside, giving personal space to play.

For babies and young children with disabilities and additional needs, introducing plenty of first-hand experiences and gesture supported by communication in a nurturing predictable environment brings worthwhile learning opportunities. These offer children possibilities for developing symbol use and symbol making in their own unique ways.



Fig. 5: Sitting baby with Treasure Basket

Observation

A child is sitting on a mat supported with cushions, under a tree for shade. The child, who is a wheelchair user, enjoys the experience of reaching for large stones, managing to lift them with two hands and choosing where to place them around or on the mat. It was possible to reach for these by stretching and grasping. Other children brought stones they found and placed them on the edge of the mat so that there was plenty of choice to select from. A third child came and sat on the mat, becoming a companion in the first-hand experience of different stones.

At story time the educator told the Aesop story of the crow trying to drink from a tall, thin pot. The bird gathers small stones in their beak, dropping them in the water to raise the water level enough to be able to drink. This story was told using props of real stones from the mat. The first-hand experience with stones meant that the child was included. The storytelling held meaning and was in the company of friends enjoying this time together.

The greatest learning appears in play resulting from a child's lived experiences. What they have found fascinating from these activities will show in their play. As children begin to walk and talk, pretend play emerges, especially if supported by older children and adults. Their thinking develops in the symbolic representations and play scenarios they make and create.



Fig. 6: Warming by a campfire, sitting in the forest – a first-hand experience



Fig. 7: Child and adult enjoying a first-hand experience together



Fig. 8: A symbolic representation of the first-hand experience of a family party

Families and educators can support children to reflect back on their experiences and represent their new knowledge symbolically in many ways. They might make a book with their drawings and photographs of a meal they helped to prepare. There may be lentils, carrots, and people. There may be a drawing of three spoons indicating the recipe needs three spoons of flour.

Children can also learn to take their own photographs with a mobile phone and how to print them. Children enjoy making their own nature book, drawing pictures to show what they saw in the garden. They might draw, stick in their photos or mark-make, which leads into emergent and early writing. A floor book also encourages children to participate in mark-making. Through these activities children are entering a lifelong journey becoming symbol users, finders and makers.

Children are supported in this if there are a variety of resources – sticky tape dispensers, scissors, paper, pens, hole punchers, string – either available throughout the setting or in a designated area that might be called the workshop. Having a workshop area means children can become autonomous (being as independent as they can, knowing how to get help when it is needed and with educators who observe and support when help is indicated).



Fig. 9: Floor drawings



Fig. 10: Collage and drawing of a flock of rooks and a bird table

This collage (Fig. 10) is an example of the way children use their first-hand experiences to express what they have experienced in a symbolic form. The child was fascinated to see rooks flying in different formations and perching on trees in nature. They represented this symbolically. In the garden at home there is a bird feeding table where different birds come such as robins, tits and finches.

The child knows the names of the birds because of their first-hand experiences of seeing them in the garden and in nature beyond. This is an example of Froebel's Forms. There is everyday **Life** first-hand experience. There is **Beauty** in the patterns of bird flight. There is **Knowledge** of birds, their names and habitats and feeding patterns.

Children put to good use the influence that everyday first-hand experiences, both indoors and out of doors, have for worthwhile learning. The learning transforms into their pretend play and in the symbolic representations they make. Symbolic representation can be through a variety of media.

Examples are:

- Froebel's Gifts (wooden block play).
- The Occupations - for example parquetry, stick laying, paper folding, sewing, drawing, painting, collage, stick and pea construction and clay modelling.
- The Mother (family) Songs and Movement Games lead into song, music, dance, drama and storytelling.



Fig. 11: Emergent drawing - trajectories and circular marks. This child is mark making and getting to know how felt pens work. A first-hand experience. This lays the way for later symbolic representations

The child was shown what to press on the phone in order to change the colours (Fig. 12). The appearance of the river was transformed. The child enjoyed practising this newly learnt skill to make different symbols representing the river. The river colours showed darkness and a sunny river, seen here. The adult stayed with the child making supportive conversation by commenting on changes and asking how the child made these, naming the edit mode that was used. This helped the child to embed the skill as well as appreciating the river portrayed symbolically.

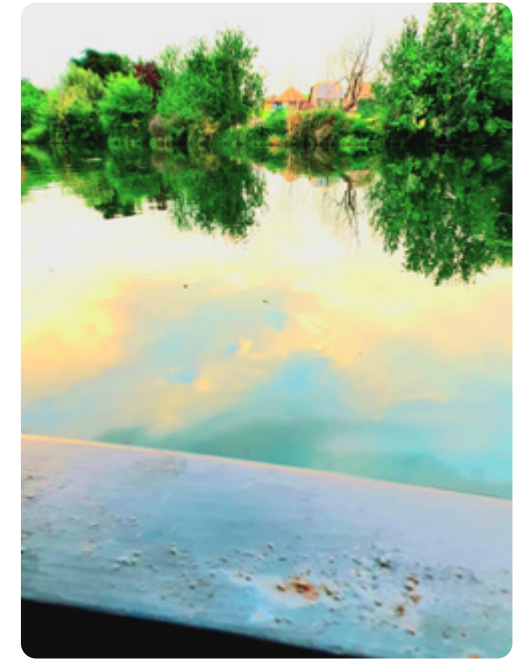


Fig. 12: This child took a photo on their father's mobile phone and then edited it

There are many ways to be a symbol finder, maker and user. This encourages creativity as children begin to find their favourite form of symbolic expression.

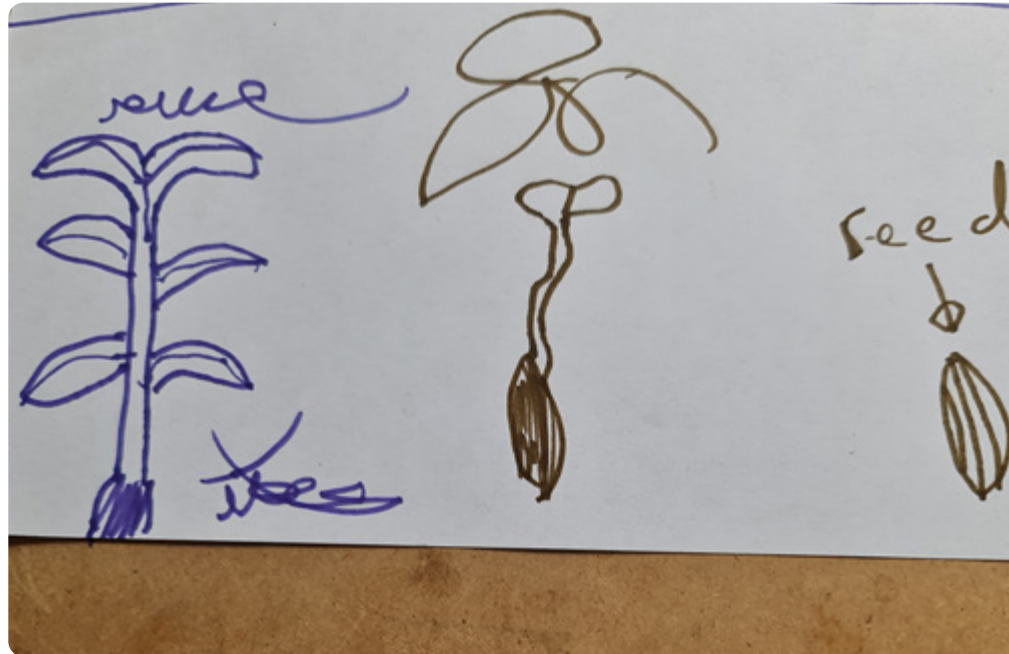


Fig. 13: A seed growing into a plant

This child's drawing of a seed growing (Fig. 13) demonstrates Froebel's Forms. The child has, through everyday **Life** experiences, seen a plant grow. There is **Beauty**. The child is showing their **Knowledge** of the way a plant grows, expressing this by making and using symbols to share what they know.

This child is left-handed, so has drawn the seed from the right side of the page rather than the typical sequencing from left to right. This will be an important observation in view of later reading and writing in literacy forms of symbolic representation.



Fig. 14: A laptop computer

“A Froebelian approach to creativity is about children representing their own ideas in their own way. As children gain experience and understand the symbolic potential of materials, ideas can be explored with increasing complexity. It is not about copying and assembling adult-designed artefacts or filling-in pre-drawn outlines.”

Tovey 2020 in Cave 2021, p. 9



Fig. 15: The child has sewn a symbolic representation of a bee. Sewing is one of Froebel's Occupations (Imray, Thomson and Whinnett 2023)



Fig. 16: A building



Fig. 17: Symbolic representation of a bee. The painting is detailed and accurately observed because the child has had a first-hand experience of seeing bees in nature

Relationships matter

Play feature 2

Play is about wallowing in ideas, feelings and relationships. It helps the process of becoming physically aware of self in relation to others and the world beyond. It brings unity and connectedness.



Fig. 18: Playing on a log

The adult in Fig. 18 is talking to the child, commenting on how it helps to stick out your arms when balancing, and to walk like a pigeon and to keep the head up high. This is equipping the child to have a go with confidence, feeling safe holding the adult's hand, yet able to go solo. The joy is evident. By becoming skilled in the physical sense, the child is developing the possibility to engage in free flow play (Bruce 1991) with a log. Play with people is one possibility. Play with materials in the world of nature is another.

Babies and children benefit from spending time with people who enjoy, appreciate and value their company. Conversing without rushing their learning means everyone has a worthwhile experience and this empowers learning.



Fig. 19: Communicating and enjoying each other's company

“Children who are just becoming confident in any kind of expression need a sensitive audience who recognise their intentions and right to express themselves.”

Whinnett 2012, p. 125



Fig. 20: The right help, in the right way, at the right time



Fig. 21: The adult helped this child to carry out their idea, taking instructions, and the child then took over and painted the seat

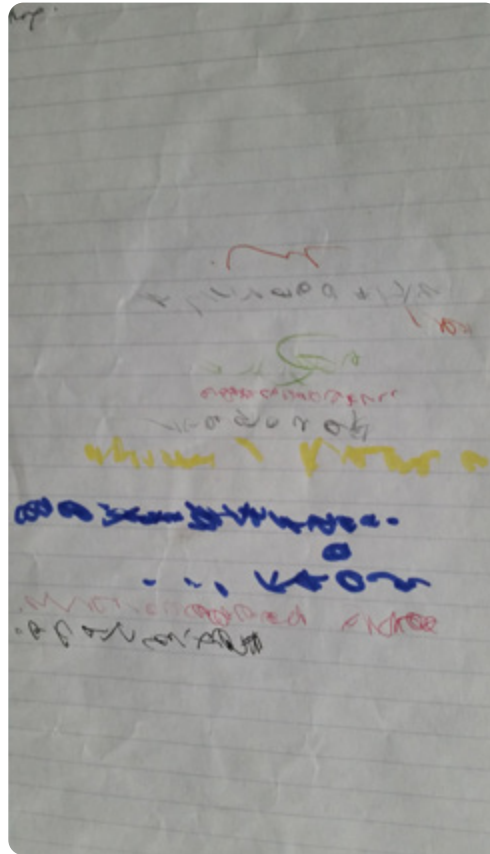


Fig. 22: A shopping list

One example of an everyday experience that supports children to think of the needs of their friends, other children and family is shopping to buy ingredients for making fruit salad. Who likes which fruit? Who wants to try something new? Does anyone have any allergies? It is helpful to talk together and make a list with the children before setting out. The children might want to 'write' the list. They often make symbolic representations using mark-making zig zags, enclosures, and lines to do this. They might draw a picture.



Fig. 23: Learning the steps of a dance that can be repeated and shared

Gradually children realise their name is written down the same way each time. At first they write for themselves using personal symbols. As they begin to see how to share what they have written they experiment with using conventional symbols.

Children begin by dancing for themselves, often spontaneously. In the same way as learning to write, children begin to understand that dance steps can be repeated and shared. Dances become choreographed and performed. Froebel's Movement Games highlighted the interdependence of children making their own physical movements and using those with shared rules in the movements.

Many symbols are influenced by place and culture, including what we wear. Dressing up clothes help children to think about other people as they become characters from stories and their pretend play scenarios. Expensive outfits are unnecessary.

A box containing pieces of fabric has endless possibilities. Capes, simple shifts, elastic waisted skirts and trousers, belts and scarves work well and cover a broad range of roles from pirates, ancient Rome to fairies, mermaids, everyday family life, hospitals, space travel, baddies and goodies. The youngest children usually begin dressing up choosing hats and shoes. Hats help to define characters, such as fire fighters, building site helmets, tiaras, rain hats, space hats. Children begin to make outfits for themselves and for dolls in the workshop if encouraged.

These simple resources can be set out for children to select in separate boxes. Pieces of fabric can be hung from hooks.

Symbolic pretend play centres around characters and narratives. Later on, these will become important elements of creative writing. Telling and reading stories to children and singing songs with them gives further encouragement. They often use themes from literature in their play and symbol making.

In the observation on p. 16 the dressing up clothes are put together creatively by children. This is because they are simple resources rather than commercially made costumes. Creativity also develops if children have a workshop area with pieces of material, ribbons, with a variety of resources. These can be set out in clearly presented boxes from which children can select. Tools such as scissors, glue, tape and string can be presented in boxes and returned there after use. A buzz of creative symbol making follows.



Fig. 24: Rescuing the brave knight from the dragon with a magic charm

“Storytelling and sociodramatic play are complementary modes of narrative activity and initially emerge separately and distinctly.”

Gill 2020, p. 187

Observation

Every morning, a child goes to the box with the hats in it. The blue hat symbolises 'the power'. Next this child goes to the large pieces of fabric hanging on pegs in a row. The blue one is selected, with the comment in a deep false voice 'Power!' Next stop is the box containing scarves. One is wrapped around the middle. The child knows how to tie a knot so that it doesn't slip down. A friend joins and together they find a similar costume. They run about the room shouting 'Power!'. The educator asks them what is their power? They clearly don't know. An animated discussion with the educator follows which helps them decide that they need to make spells in their lair.

They go into the garden busily creating a den (their lair). They arrange boxes as an enclosure and begin making mud pies, with pots, stirring with sticks and adding water. They are going to conquer evil (a phrase they liked when the educator suggested it). They talk together about the (pretend) baddies and send spells, staying in their lair. They hold their stick in the air and shout 'We are the power.'

The battles between good and evil are at the base of Drama. The educator had supported them by guiding the play to have characters and narrative rather than simply dressing up and running about shouting. This shows the importance of 'freedom with guidance'.

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The child follows through from making the clothes for the rat character (Fig. 25) and provides a home for the rat to hide in (Fig. 27). Creativity can take unexpected ways. There are flowers on the tabletop and rats like these, the child explains, so the rat house needs to be made there. The child asked the educator if they can take blocks from the block area. This is not normally permitted. But children who are autonomous will seek help from adults they trust to encourage their creativity. The child agrees to clear them away and return them to the block play area, but the rat house is allowed to stay overnight. The educator takes a photo for the child to have a record of their symbolic representations.

Drawing on large paper on the floor, chalk drawing on hard surfaces out of doors, and painting walls with blackboard paint provide opportunities for children to make large symbolic representations.



Fig. 25: Cutting up old socks to make clothes for the toy rat - a child's idea



Fig. 26: A large blackboard allows a large drawing



Fig. 27: A house for the toy rat for the toy rat - a child's idea

Solitary play and play with others

Solitary play is often where children show their deepest thinking in exploring an idea, feeling or relationship. Different experiences come together in new and fascinating ways.

Play feature 3

Play can be solitary, giving personal space in a busy world, supporting contemplation and well-being because it gives strength to deal with life's events and to feel a sense of agency. Having a sense of being in control and having autonomy matters in keeping mentally healthy.

Observation

On an outing in cold weather, one child enjoyed skimming pebbles across a frozen puddle and gathered some to take back to the setting (Fig. 28). She then made a secret home for a snake (Fig. 29). She had been interested in the wormery in the group setting she attends and had seen a film about snakes on TV. These experiences in her everyday life are interconnected, resulting in a symbolic representation. She uses the snake's home as a play prop throughout the day and wants to take it home. Her mother reports that she has continued with this play scenario for several days, wallowing in it. Focus, follow through and concentration are important parts of learning arising from play and symbol making.



Fig. 28: Skimming pebbles over a frozen puddle. This first-hand experience leads to a symbolic representation using stones, and rich solitary play. This is a typical journey into creativity



Fig. 29: The stone house where the snake lives

No-one else could have created this unique play scenario or made this symbolic representation. Because children are solitary in this kind of play, adults might not realise the depth and richness of their thinking. In our lives, a great deal of our learning is not revealed to others, but it is nevertheless put to good use.

The educator has a close working relationship with the mother and so they shared their observations. This helped to see the patterns and connections in her interests, with stones, snakes and worms. When she was focusing in her solitary play it was not the moment to begin a conversation. But later, at group time, children were invited to bring anything they wanted to share. This child did so and told the group about her play (the stone house and where the snake lives).

The educator tuned into her enjoyment of her symbolic representation, her play with what she represented, and her self-awareness and fulfilment through her creativity. Her mother tuned in by welcoming the symbolic representation of the snake's stone house and allowed it a place in her bedroom.

Play feature 4

Play can be in partnership between children or between adult and child. Or it might be in a group with or without an adult joining in. Adults need to be careful not to invade, overwhelm or extinguish the children's possibilities for free flow play. Freedom with guidance is a delicate balance and alters moment by moment as the play flows along.

The snake play was solitary, but this child also enjoyed playing with other children in the park, running from tree to tree to get away from an imaginary dragon who was chasing them.

When the children began spontaneously skimming pebbles over an iced puddle, the adult quietly suggested they all skimmed from the same side so that pebbles would not hit anyone. This is an example of Froebel's 'freedom with guidance'.



Fig. 30: Children play at running away from a dragon



Fig. 31: A ladybird painted on a stone

A toddler picked up dry stones and dipped them in the water, looking at the way the colour became darker. When the group returned to the setting the child went to the workshop area, selected felt pens and drew patterns on the pebbles collected. Other children joined in and animals began to emerge.



Fig. 32: Painting at an easel

Children benefit from trying out different media and resources to represent their thoughts, feelings and ideas symbolically. Symbolic representation uses many different kinds of media. Children often have preferences for one way of representing.



Fig. 33: Hand painting

Play feature 5

Play is self-propelling and spontaneous. Children cannot be made to play. The circumstances and relationships need to be right for the child's play to begin to free flow.

Observation

A group of children rushed to the scrambling net and one shouted, 'We are pirates! Climb the rigging!'. They all quickly joined in. The adult noticed that a younger child was watching and asked if they would like to play pirates. The answer was, 'No'. The educator did not pressurise the child to join the play.

Instead, the educator stayed and they watched the play together. 'The pirates are climbing the rigging now. They're looking to see if they are near land I think.' The educator helped the child to see what the play was about. Younger children often need to spend time watching play before they wish to join in.



Fig. 34: A younger child observes older children playing with a farm



Fig. 35: Companionship play together

Children really appreciate adults who are spectators with them, and who help them to join in when they feel they would like to. Being a good companion to the child helps the symbolic pretend play to develop.

From real life play to creative play



Fig. 36: Making pancakes

Play feature 6

When play is in full flow it helps children to be in advance of what they can actually do in their real lives.

Throughout the world in different cultural contexts, children play at food preparation, driving cars, riding horses, caring for pets, gardening, shopping, going to the doctor, meeting and parting, having family get togethers, weddings, being angry, sad or excited, going to sleep. This kind of play is close to their real-life experiences.

Observation

A child is pretending to demonstrate cookery on a television show she has watched with her family. 'Today I am going to show you how to make pancakes. I like my pancakes to be nice and round'. She has a cardboard box for her table and sticks to symbolise spoons and spatulas. She uses a large leaf for the frying pan, holding the stem for the handle. She mixes earth with water and pours it onto the leaf. She gathers more leaves and slides the earth pancakes onto these. Other children begin to join her and her play scenario transforms. She is no longer a TV presenter. She has become the cook at a gathering, serving people with pancakes.

Experienced players can rearrange and be flexible, responding to the situation. It was enjoyable to play alone, but now it is more satisfying to play in the group.

Play feature 7

Play is about creating possible, alternative, imagined worlds. These can lift children from real and literal situations to deeper kinds of imagining and creating ideas. The symbolic life of the child uses life experiences in increasingly abstract and transformed ways.



Fig. 37 a, b, c: The adult helped to make the pumpkin house, but the child quickly understood how to make the paper folding furniture and found people to live in the house

“Allowing time and space for children’s authentic responses involved at times setting up and creating play-spaces, stepping back, observing, holding back from interrupting, following children’s interests, and also creating a space for children’s participation.”

Craft, McConnon and Matthews 2017, p. 57



Fig. 38: Fierce voices for the fierce animals



Fig. 39: Allowing children time and space for play helps their thinking

A boy is talking with fierce monster voices (Fig. 38). Each monster has a different character. This is symbolic pretend play. He knows that animals do not talk, but he is rearranging and transforming real life. Supposing animals could talk. Supposing there could be monsters. This is a time to leave him without interruption, or the play might be extinguished. His play might need protecting if he is unhappy when another child joins him, not wanting to share his play scenario but wanting to use the animals in a different way. Asking, 'Do you remember when you didn't want to share your teddy?' often helps children to begin to understand the needs of others. Encouraging a child to check if they could take one of the animals their friend is not using might also be helpful.

Play feature 8

There is nothing to show at the end of a play scenario. When the play ends, the play fades, never to be exactly replicated. There is no end product.

Observation

A group of children took cushions from the sofa to become pretend horses. They put jumpers over them to become coats. They found string and made reins and used pipe cleaners to make the stirrups. They placed a pile of pipe cleaners on the floor for the horses to eat as hay. They sat on the cushions and rode them. One of the children started to make a grid pattern with the pipe cleaners, and soon all the children were doing this, and hanging them from bushes in the garden. They became staircases for gnomes to climb.



Fig. 40: Horses in the stable with hay to eat

This observation demonstrates the importance of Froebel's Forms. The children lived in the countryside and spent time with horses as an everyday **Life** experience. Symbolic representations of the horses and their gear shows they understand the balance of the saddle, the reins and the stirrups connecting together in a pattern. This is Froebel's Form of **Beauty**. As they play they talk about galloping, cantering, trotting showing their **Knowledge** of different speeds and the details of horse grooming and care.

There is also Froebel's 'freedom with guidance'. They have been allowed to take cushions from the sofa but have agreed to replace them at the end of the day. It helps children if they do not have to clear up immediately at the fading of the play or the fading of the day. They were allowed to do this at home time. They left some of the play resources in a box to use the next day at the suggestion of the adult.



Fig. 41: This drawing of a horse and cart emerged a few days after a ride in the local park. There is often a gap between having a rich first-hand experience and keeping hold of the experience in a symbolic representation

Play feature 9

Play enables children to experiment with the rules they encounter in their culture.

“Play is to the child a mirror of life-long struggles that await him. Therefore in order to gain strength for these, children seek obstacles, difficulties and strife in their play.”

Froebel 1887, p. 118

Observation

A child is pretend playing being naughty. Her friend is the parent. She refuses to do anything 'right'. She runs across the road. She throws her plate of food on the floor. She screams and stamps her feet. She demands sweets in the shop. The parent puts her to bed and threatens her with no sweets. The naughty child escapes and the parent chases her to the painting area, where they both sit down and the play episode fades as quickly as it arrived.

The children were exploring the implications of making, breaking and keeping rules. Play is a powerful vehicle for doing this. If children become scared or overwhelmed, they can leave the play and escape from it. These children knew when they had experimented enough with breaking rules, but educators need to be alert and sensitive to the children's priorities and feelings.

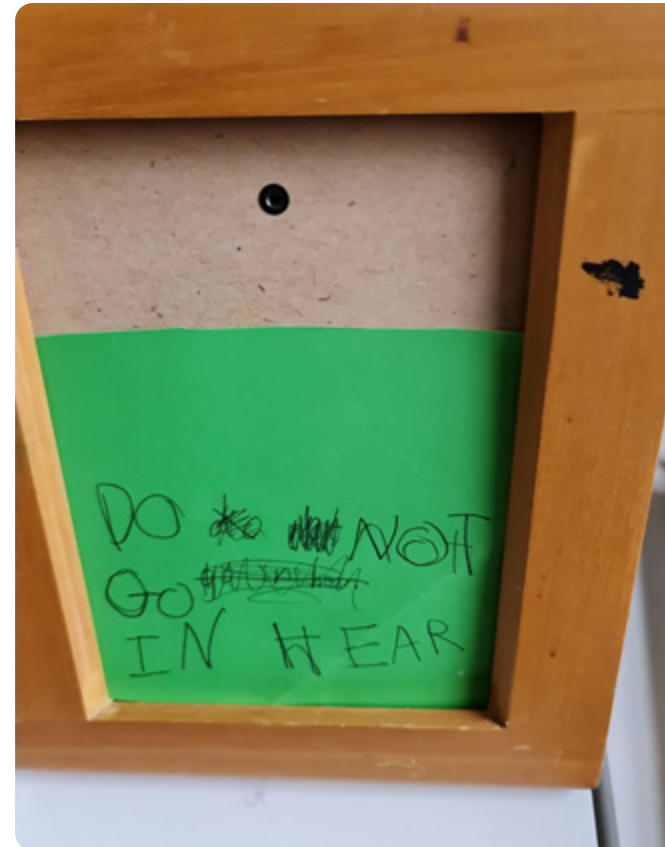


Fig. 42: Experimenting with rules, courtesy and kindness

Symbols found, shared and made

First-hand experiences matter because they are the foundation for play which flows and cannot be pinned down. Symbols help to remind us of experiences we have had and to keep hold of them. This helps us to learn. The child's mother has asked if this is a shopping trolley. The child liked this idea and in response picked leaves to represent the shopping, encouraged by his mother.

As they begin to name things, children delight in using a pointing finger. Adults can show toddlers that a finger might become a symbol, perhaps of a bird. A rhyme or song might accompany the action and young children gradually join in with family or educators in a group setting.



Fig. 43: The first-hand experience in the garden leads to the child making a shopping trolley

Froebel's observations of babies and young children led him to create the *Mutter- und Kose-Lieder* (Mother Songs) (1844). These were songs for families to use at home, but educators also use fingerplays in group care settings. Babies do not at first understand the words. Words are symbols. If adults sing the song showing them birds in the park and using the symbols of their fingers, symbolic understanding gradually emerges: 'Two little birds sitting on a wall...'. Repetition helps. Singing or saying the song/rhyme once is not enough. The baby will signal when they want to finish by looking or turning away.

"Even the child's own fingers must become something else such as fishes or birds."

Froebel in Lilley 1967, p. 112

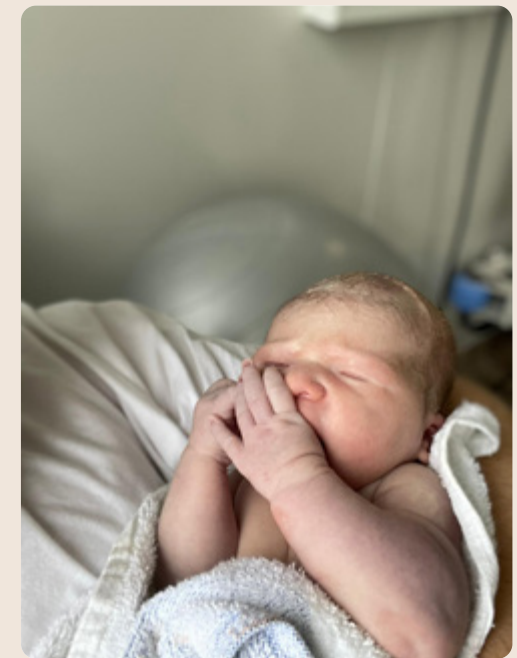


Fig. 44: Hands and fingers matter from the beginning

Play feature 10

Play can be initiated by a baby, child or adult. But if adults play with children, they need to remember that their play agenda is no more important than that of any of the players. Free flow play is a bit like a conversation or dancing together, with each listening and tuning into the other.

Helping play to flow is an important role for the educator. Children may need encouragement to find ready-made play props and also to make them, supporting them to follow their own interests.



Fig. 45: The child initiates the swirling dance and the adult provides the music the child has chosen

“We invested in a Disney Frozen storybook (Golden Books) and small world figures. On the first day I reflected that the child’s knowledge of the story was far deeper than my own. I spent time later rewatching the film to deepen my knowledge. The children fluidly moved in and out of the story and songs: however, with limited figures it was difficult to actually retell the story. A girl suggested that we make more figures, and the children made the marshmallow snowman and the trolls from plasticine and a sleigh out of junk, and we collected other resources from the cupboard, including a horse, boat and various loose parts that could be used to build locations of the castle, the trolls’ home and the ice palace. As a result the play was transformed.”

Fullerton 2020 p. 124

Children begin to make increasingly elaborate play props as they become skilled players.

The children made clay people and furniture for their house which they wanted to be placed in the garden because that is where these people live. The educator helped them to carry the people so they did not disintegrate by putting them on a plate and placing them where the children directed. This is freedom with guidance. The children would have been upset if their people had become damaged.



Fig. 46: The clay people are placed in their garden home

“A child may pick up clay from the ground, peacefully rolling and forming the clay.”

McNair 2012 p. 58



Fig. 47: Playing with sand

“The child’s need to make use of the most pliable and delicate material in his creative work is in accordance with the activity and phenomena of Nature which creates from light, air, water, earth and dust.... We must respect the child’s desire to affirm his powers of expression through these objects, since he is proving that he is both a creative being and also part of the whole circle of life.”

Froebel in Lilley 1967, p. 115



Fig. 48: Playing with earth

Children make creative use of readymade play props, transforming them into the symbols they need. If there is only one way that a toy or resource can be used, this often narrows the play. Wooden blocks are an example of open-ended provision.

Just as it would not be permitted for another child to mark make on a child's drawing, so some children may need personal space when they engage in block play. Children who join the block play can be encouraged to make a construction alongside, and often children decide to join them together. The role of the adult offering freedom with guidance is important in protecting a child's creativity.



Fig. 49: Solitary block play using unit blocks

Observation

A child (6 years) made a jam tart for a doll's tea party. She made and cooked dough (with adult help heating it in the oven). The tart was then painted red. She darkened the red as she wanted raspberry jam and not strawberry. When dried it was taken to the dolls' tea party all set out with 8 dolls at 8 placements. Each doll had a name

place and a character. The tart was cut into 8 slices by the child. Looking at the result she was not pleased that some slices were bigger than others. She commented that they were not proper 8ths. But she adjusted her play narrative so that the dolls began to argue about who has the biggest slice.

Play begins to burgeon and blossom fully from 5–8 years. It is important to give it the space, time and support to flourish. This child has planned, organised and executed her idea, knows how to make the paint colour she wants. She knows the scientific properties of paint and dough. She found a hitch with the slice sizes and is dealing with fractions in Mathematics.

She has been helped to use the oven safely, knows how to use a knife, and appreciates an adult being supportive. She includes characters and narrative story, with points of dramatic crisis (the dolls have an argument) which allows the play to flow despite a hitch. She shows concentration, autonomy, flexibility and self-discipline.

Play feature 11

As they play children show their technical prowess and the competence they have developed. They are confident and in control. Play helps adults to realise what children already know, have been learning and what they can do and understand.

In group co-operative play each player needs to know the basic themes. Does everyone playing know if the shop is closed or open? Children begin to discover that this is one of the advantages of writing. It creates symbols that can be shared.

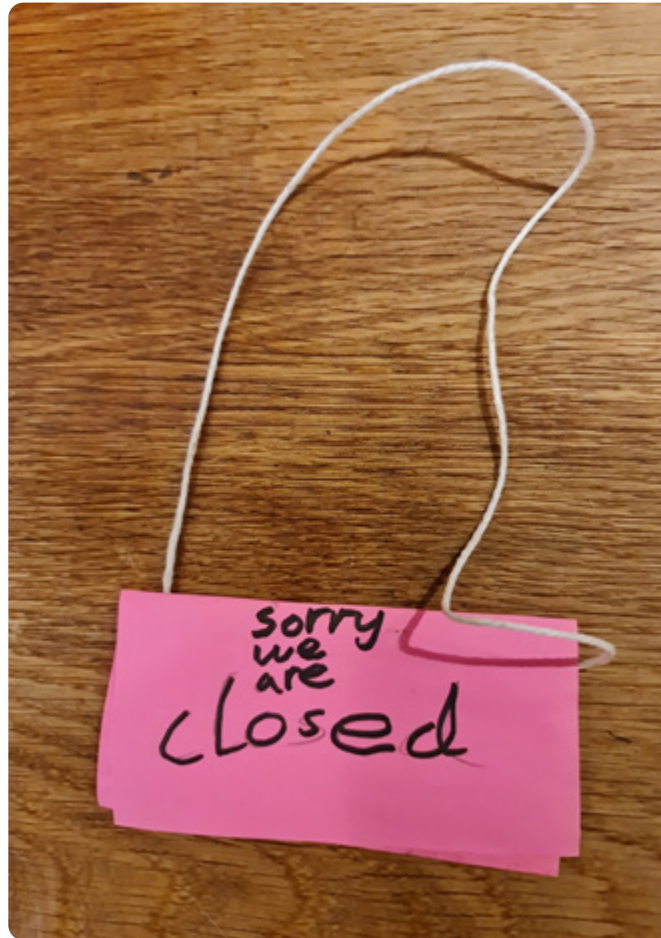


Fig. 50: The notice tells people the shop is closed



Fig. 51: The child made the shop and another child made the clay bread loaves. The adult helped by holding wooden parts still when asked

“The best method is one in which children do not learn to read and write but in which both these skills are found in play situations.”

Vygotsky 1978, p. 118

Final thoughts

Froebel's principles offer educators a series of navigational tools. They include the following:

- Children need time and spaces indoors and outdoors. Avoiding over timetabling their day and giving **Freedom** to play, explore symbolic possibilities and develop their creativity matters.
- Children need adults who observe, support and extend their play, symbol development and creativity. They need **Guidance** which nurtures.
- **Observation** matters because it enables adults to tune into what children can do. They become able to begin where the learner is, rather than focusing on what the child can't yet do. This brings out the best effort and fulfilment for both adults and children. It promotes worthwhile, holistic learning.

- Children do their best thinking in a nurturing atmosphere and environment. **Relationships** are key to this. Children need to feel listened to and to feel that their family is valued.
- Helping children to know themselves and to be comfortable about who they are opens up their possibilities to learn.
- The **Unity** in understanding self, other people, community, nature and the wider world supports holistic learning.

“Make the internal external and the external internal, to find the unity for both.”

Froebel 1887 p. 41

As children play alone and together, explore and make symbolic representations, they show how creative they are – and the interdependence between their ideas, thoughts, feelings and relationships.



Fig. 52: This child is making a nest after finding a bit of discarded bird's eggshell. The symbolic representation (in this case a play prop) develops into free flow play

Play feature 12

Play is an integrating mechanism which brings together everything the child has been learning, knows, feels 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 is a powerful resource for life both in the present and the future.

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