



**A Froebelian practice guidance paper:
The Complexity of Play in
Networks of Development and
Learning**

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This guidance paper foregrounds Froebelian practice-based research using one of the strands explored across three years by the Froebel Partnership. The complexity of play and its place in networks of developing learning is the focus of this paper. Although the idea that children learn through play is a much-promoted idea in generalist early childhood education, it is in reality complex and challenging to understand. Friedrich Froebel (1782-1851) was a pioneer in identifying the educational worth of play. These practice guidance notes give a specifically Froebelian lens through which to explore and understand the contribution of play to a child's life within and beyond educational settings.

“Play helps children to relate to 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.” (Froebel Trust Principles).

“Play is the highest level of child development. It is the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling – an expression which inner life requires.” (Froebel in Lilley, 1967: 83).

“Play is never trivial; it is serious and deeply significant.” (Froebel in Lilley, 1967: 84).

The value of play

Both children and adults influence the way play flows, changing moment by moment and ever shifting. Play cannot be pinned down. It is flexible and open ended, and that is its huge strength because it allows exploration, risk taking, adventure, experimentation and alternative ways of acting. Anna Craft (2015) refers to this as ‘possibility thinking’.

It is important to explore how **play** makes use of and is part of networks involving the **everyday experiences** of a child's life; the finding, making and using of symbols to **represent** people and the material world; and the **cultural elements** children experience and ponder, questioning the rules, breaking and making as they explore the world they find. Through their cultural encounters, children and adults as actors, do things in familiar or different ways, for example as they prepare and cook food, greet each other, wear clothes, speak in different languages.

Play integrates learning (Ellis and Bloch 2023) and is an overarching mechanism which in its deepest layer transforms understanding of one's relationship with self, others and the wider world. This brings wellbeing, and rich physical, affective, spiritual and intellectual life as, linked with the four lenses, the journey of play is developed. Play is a powerful integrating mechanism which develops learning but this does depend on play taking place in the companionship of supportive adults who create places that are temporally, physically and rhythmically conducive. Knowledgeable and nurturing educators are essential companions in promoting play.

The journey of play into its deepening layers

The nuanced, deeply layered and complex journey of play starts with its **foundations** steeped in a world of first-hand experiences. Children explore, using an integration of their senses, their environment, the resources, the possibilities. They get to know spaces, materials and appreciate nurturing, supportive and empowering help that encourages their autonomy. Autonomy is about having an idea, knowing when you need help, and knowing how to find and use it. Froebel called this freedom with guidance.

Children imitate the actions of people and the world around them. They behave like a person using a smart phone, shopping with a trolley, like a dog moving on four legs or a train on a track. They are beginning to put to use their everyday experiences. They are 'being like' a phone user, shopper, animal or train. This is **emerging imitative play**.

As they journey into deeper layers of play children often move to and fro between foundations of play and emerging imitative play. Play is layered.

Another layer is the development of **literal pretend play**. Gradually children show us that they are doing more than 'being like' a person, animal, or imitating the movement of a train on a track. This can be identified in various ways. People and situations **become** what they imitate. It might be *role play*, where children explore what is a possible part of an adult life. They become a shopkeeper at the till. The train might be located in small world play, where the real world in miniature is created and in which as the train approaches the station, a child calls out 'mind the gap.'

Deepening imaginative play is what Bredikyte (in Bruce, Hakkarainen and Bredikyte, 2017) describes as mature play. Other examples of typologies of play include Callois (1961), Moyles (1989), Hutt et al (1989), Hughes (1996) and Louis (2021). Children begin to rearrange what is known, creating possible, alternative or unreal worlds. Imagination (McKellar in Bruce, 1991) is the rearrangement of past experience in new and fascinating ways. This kind of play lifts children from real and literal situations to deeper play possibilities, revealing layers which shift and change as the play scenario progresses. Literal and imaginative contexts are not a linear or static development. They move to and fro.

Characters develop. For example, some pebbles in the mud kitchen become people who are sleeping. They are covered with a leaf over each of them. Each pebble has a different voice and a narrative emerges, with the decision to have a party. The pebbles are moved and they sit in a circle and eat bits of grass.

The [layers of play](#) have come from a long lineage of work evident in publications by Tina Bruce across the years from 1991. For readers wanting to know more, the key publications are listed in the further reading section at the end of this paper.

The layers of play have been developed by Tina Bruce and the Froebel Partnership over three years of practice-led research. Analysis by the Froebel Partnership team of the data collected by the research settings caused the thinking that led to the development of the layers of play. The layers provide accessible ways of helping educators to be effective, sensitive and supportive play companions or helping children into their play scenarios.

Research fascinations and interests foregrounding play

The practice-led research carried out by the Froebel Partnership in 2023/24 particularly foregrounded play. As befits Froebelian values, much of the Partnership's work has grown organically from what has been learnt from the children, families and educators. For instance, the first joint project of listening to young children's stories during Covid gave rise to the next research project into engaging with nature. This was due to the finding that children, families and educators gained much solace from being outside during and after the first lockdown. From studying the affordances of spaces outdoors came the realisation of children's interest in gardening hence the next research project into the Occupations. Professional dialogues about the Occupations showed that educators would welcome researching and deepening their understanding about play. Thus, educators and researchers spent months exploring, reflecting on and considering these fascinations:

- How might block play support, enable and promote the development of play?
- How can we support the development of play for children who are pre-verbal?

- How does play differ in the indoor role play area and the outdoor mud kitchen?
- How different and similar is the play of boys and girls?
- How can we support the development of play in the garden for those children learning English as an additional language?
- How can we support (or if necessary protect) the development of play for children who appear to be observers/bystanders?
- How can we support the development of play for children who seem not to want/choose/know how to play?

The following analysis of children's play demonstrate:

- How educators have supported and extended the play of individual children
- What, as a result of observing and analysing the play, educators have learnt about the play
- What and how educators might do to further support and extend the play.

Narrative 1:

Nina builds a tower, she adds wooden people (different sizes) and a rubber strip. She explains that it is Rapunzel's tower, with Rapunzel, the witch and the prince as the people she moves around.

Nina is developing her literal pretend play, she builds up her Rapunzel set starting with the tower. Her role playing is beginning as she adds characters moving them around the tower and then adding the rubber strip for Rapunzel's hair. She is very engaged and involved, making changes as she uses her characters, she enjoys sharing her play with her Key Person and is building her confidence in sharing it with other children.



Nina is 4 years old, she speaks Cantonese and is learning English.

The day before this scenario, the adult had told the story of Rapunzel. There had been no pictures so the children had had to use their imagination as they shared the story. There was much chanting of "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair." Stories with repeated refrains are very supportive for all young children and especially those learning English. Nina informs the adult that she has this same story at home. Stories at home and in the setting are providing Nina with the **foundations of play** from which more layers of play can develop and grow. The layers of play are not in a linear progression. Several layers of play may interact as the play flows.

Nina is using the blocks and other open-ended resources (the rubber strip) to retell a known story. She makes the wooden people into the characters from the story. She is afforded the time and space to do this and is comfortable playing alone but near to other children and the adult. She is **developing literal pretend play**, retelling the story with the props and enjoying doing so alongside other children.

What could happen next in order to help Nina develop her play?

As the educator is a trusted companion in Nina's play she might be happy for photographs to be taken. The educator might make a little book of these as a reminder of her play and a message that it is valued. This can be more powerful than discussion during the play. That might invade the play. Language flows more easily later when sharing the photos with Nina and her play companions. The photos will also encourage Nina to reflect on the experience thus further developing her learning.

When stories are told or read to children in a group or individually, small world props might be left near the book for children to use the story in their play. Stories will be carefully chosen based on what children have been interested in and observed to find fascinating.

Staff might check there are stories and books familiar to Nina from her cultural background. Are there any books in her language and representing her family's cultural context? Does she have stories which give her a sense of belonging in her play?

Do the play resources offered in the setting encourage the development of technical prowess? Playing with wooden blocks is an example (see the photograph of her construction).

Narrative 2:



Sometimes the children surprise you with the way they choose to use a space. The mud kitchen and home corner are both frequently used for pretend play around cooking and eating. This photo is taken from a [video](#) showing Robbie using the mud kitchen pots and pans as a drum kit. This was a self-initiated piece of play.

Regulating his emotions has been Robbie's biggest barrier to learning and he has had much support. He still finds disappointments tricky but now has these strategies to help him manage.

He loves being outside and learns best outdoors when he is active although he does not like any rough and tumble play.

He is fascinated by nature and really enjoys gardening.

He likes to be involved in everything but he is also quite independent.

He is usually content and quietly confident. He will seek out the company of others when he wants.

He remembers loads and even details that one might think a child would not recall.

Robbie is beginning to find he can make use of the material resources, especially what he finds outside. He is developing the **foundations of play**. He can now engage in playing in companionship when other children are near, but he needs to feel in control with a feeling of his own agency. The materials he is offered matter as they remind him of what drums are like and this promotes his play.

In Robbie's **foundations of play** he is drawing on his experiences of seeing people play on drums and trying this out, experimenting with and exploring the pots and pans. His cultural experiences will influence his rhythms and styles.

His play has developed to become **emerging imitative play**. He captures the rhythms, tone and pace of being a drummer, but he is not yet placing himself in the role of literally being the drummer. He is imitating what drummers do. He is behaving like a drummer.

The layers of play are not in a linear progression. Several layers of play are interacting as the play flows.

What could happen next in order to help Robbie develop his play?

The educator who is the key person might talk with Robbie's family about his first-hand experiences of seeing drummers at home, or whether he has seen films of drummers playing music. Find out what tunes he has experienced. The family culture will influence the music he hears at home.

If you are a key person would you be able to make time to be a child's companion for play? Will you try to observe the play of your key children in more detail? You might need to look at the way key persons work in the group to see if adjustments are needed to help each other do this. Play is important and central to young children's learning. Does anyone in your group setting play the drums? Or particularly enjoy singing tunes? Could you at group time have a story with drumming in it? Ask people to save biscuit tins, and old pots and pans for children to use. It need not cost money.

Narrative 3:



When Sophie first came to nursery, she presented as quite an anxious child. She found change challenging and needed a lot of support in her first few weeks to settle. Sophie preferred adult company and often scanned the room/area to seek adults.

She is articulate with no diagnosed need but her wellbeing was low. Her anxiety was palpable.

She began to lose some anxiety for short periods of time when engaged in the Occupations with an adult (Sewing, cooking, clay, woodwork, block play, gardening). She then began to re-enact her first-hand experiences in her play. For instance, she pretended to cook stir-fry in the mud kitchen having actually prepared, cooked and eaten this earlier in the day.

Her play drew on her first-hand experience of the Froebelian Occupation of cooking. This gave her the **foundations of play** but with much adult support.

It was important to ensure that she was enabled to imitate others in their play and re-enact her own experiences.

Using the layers of play for support, educators intentionally guided her play.

Educator: 'Oh no, baby is crying, I think baby wants to sleep.'
S: 'But it's not a real baby...'

Educator: 'I think the babies are cold this morning, I can hear them crying, why don't you put some clothes on them.'
S: 'We are just pretending, aren't we?'
Educator: 'Yes, we are playing with the babies.'
S: 'Ok, this is my baby and I am going to put a hat on him.'
S took a cork and said: 'This is a little bottle of milk' then took a soft toy and said: 'This is a little pillow for the baby. My baby wants tomatoes with broccoli,' while pretending to cook alongside another child and talking about what she was doing to the other child.
Other child: 'Can you help me S, I am cooking food for my baby and your baby.'
S pretending to feed her baby.
S: 'My baby's name is Rosie.'



Because the educator was a companion in her play Sophie was able to engage in **developing literal pretend play**. Sophie follows the adult, who initiates the play, suggesting the babies need to sleep and be warm enough. Sophie checks that the baby is not real and that they will pretend together as if to reassure herself. She then moves into **developing literal pretend play** with the adult and another child as they feed their babies. The children took the initiative, changing the focus from the adult suggestion of wrapping the babies up to be warm, and instead drawing on the cooking experienced as **foundations of play**.

However, when Sophie feels supported with an adult companion in her play she shows signs of being able to layer her play with **deepening imaginative play**. She rearranges the real environment and pretends a cork is a feeding bottle and a soft toy is a pillow. She is beginning to transform and rearrange real life. The props (cork and soft toy) still function close to how things are in real life, but it has fleetingly touched on the layer of play that is about **deepening imaginative play**. She has transformed the cork to be a baby's feeding bottle and the soft toy to be a pillow.

Some months later:



Sophie is playing alone but is deeply engaged and content. She is using the mud etc. to make chocolate soup.

The only interaction Sophie needed was when she dropped the tray on the floor and looked up to the adult, suggesting what she should do. The adult said, "it's ok, you can pick it up," which she then did and carried on playing independently.

The educator supported when needed but was able to stand back and observe.

Sophie moved to get the soil and select resources to scoop the water from the sink. She was very focused using the tray to mix and stir in order to make her chocolate soup.

Sophie is using her first-hand experiences of cooking at both home and at nursery which she draws on as **foundations of play**. She has used her cooking experience in her **developing literal pretend play** as she engages in being the cook role-playing in the mud kitchen (she also does this indoors in the home corner).

Sophie knows how to use the utensils appropriately. She mixes the water and the soil to create mud for her chocolate soup. She used the sink to get the water.

She looked at the blackboard where she had previously been involved with an adult writing down ingredients. She remembered that experience and represented it again, revisiting the board.

Her play is very close to her real-life experiences of cooking and using the board with ingredients written on it. But she is now initiating more confidently in **developing literal pretend play**.

She is choosing open-ended resources with skill. Mud looks like chocolate.

First-hand experiences of cooking different recipes continue to be provided so that she can use a rich variety as

foundations of play which she layers with her **developing literal pretend play**.

She is intrinsically motivated – no-one influencing her to play with a particular theme.

The adult is observing, and supporting when needed e.g. when the tray fell on the floor. The adult helped the play to keep flowing through this moment.

She has plenty of time to wallow in her play

There are signs of high levels of involvement and wellbeing. She was happy apart from when her tray fell and she was momentarily concerned, but with adult support recovered quickly.

What could happen next in order to help Sophie develop her play?

Since she enjoys the Occupation of cooking, offering her opportunities to try different recipes, and writing them down with the ingredients will give her rich opportunities to choose in creating her **foundations of play**. She is beginning to use these in her **developing literal pretend play**.

The key person might find out what food is part of her family's cultural backcloth. Every family is different. Beginning with food that is familiar and then expanding to other cultural contexts brings rich play.

In their play children keep hold of their experiences (e.g. of cooking) representing them in the play props they find. Having resources which are open ended, like twigs and baskets means that children can begin to transform and rearrange according to their play ideas. It opens up their thinking and they see possibilities.

The group of staff might discuss objects which the children could select for use in their play? If there are pine cones, pebbles, sticks, shells for example in baskets near the mud kitchen or the home corner, children gradually begin to use them in **deepening imaginative play**.

The adult might model this in a story using these as props, or when engaged in companionship play with children. "I'm going to pretend this stick is a spoon." This encourages the transforming and rearrangement of real life which is part of **deepening imaginative play**.

Are there open-ended resources which help children to develop technical prowess as they play? Sophie can scoop and fill a container proficiently, and is gaining confidence to try again when she drops the tray as she carries it.

Narrative 4:



Anthony takes a doll from the bed and puts it on the potty. "A poo" he laughs, pointing at the potty.

He leaves the doll on the potty and finds the phone, passes it to a friend "Here you are." The phones are all put in the washing machine, Anthony pretends to turn it on and makes washing noises. He removes them laughing.

He goes to get some dough and brings it back into the home corner. He pushes down on the dough and holds it as if to say 'it's mine.'

He begins to rock on the chair, picks up the doll and holds it on his lap, rocking back and forth. He takes the doll out of the area carrying it over his shoulder like a real baby. He then moves to the book area and looks at some books.

Anthony was 2 years and 9 months at the time of this observation. English is his third language after Czech and Hungarian. This play scenario occurred a few days after an educator had spent time with some boys modelling caring for babies.

Anthony is using his real experiences of home life with, for example, the phone, the potty and the washing machine. In the school setting he has enjoyed learning how to carry a baby with an educator. These are his **foundations of play**.

In some respects, his play is **emerging imitative play**. He is imitating what people do, using the experiences he knows about, people put washing in the washing machine. He imitates real life knowing the function of the potty but this does not become a role play.

There are the beginnings of **literal pretend play**. Fleetingly the phone is a literal play prop.

What could happen next in order to help Anthony develop his play?

It might be useful to know if Anthony has any baby brothers or sisters at home.

Does his use of the dough suggest he sees cooking at home? If so, what is the cultural context of the food his family eat? Are there props in the home corner which are familiar for him to play out his family's eating context? As his play is **emerging imitative play** would it be possible to place these in the home corner? And are there dolls clothes he can put in the washing machine? Or dress a baby doll, or wrap the doll in a blanket? When play is emerging children benefit from having near to life props to use in imitating what they see people do.

His technical prowess is encouraged as he confidently carries the doll baby over his shoulder. Learning to wrap the doll in a blanket, or dressing a doll might interest him too.

A summary of the research findings

The language we use is so important as we may inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes. E.g. We can ask Mummy to wash it? Do you help Dad wash the car? The more educators thought about the language used every day with children, the more we realised that our everyday language was at times unhelpful. As Louis and Betteridge state in their book about Race in the Early Years (2024: 47) *“Educators need to interrupt and breakdown the cycle of bias and stereotyping that can have a harmful impact on relationships with children, our expectations of them, and ultimately, their development, learning and progression.”*

Professional reflective discussions support educators to become more comfortable and able to challenge their own and other’s thinking, feelings and practice. In one such discussion, educators were talking about the stereotypical gendered play they had observed amongst two-year-olds. A researcher asked the question “Are you OK with this play?” causing educators to consider this carefully and think that actually no they weren’t. Much discussion ensued as to how they would, for instance, support boys caring for the dolls in the home corner and girls to be more assertive in accessing the bikes.

Building a deeper understanding of the **layers of play** supports educators to recognise which children need more help to engage in play and to develop their play. Whilst acknowledging that children cannot be made to play, we recognise the huge value of play so it became ever more important that educators were able to understand that some children required significantly more support to engage in play. **The importance of equity** became more evident. It is not enough to provide all children with the same opportunities. Open-ended resources such as pine cones and the like did not support Nancy’s play. Nancy was a little girl with Down Syndrome who loved being in the home corner. She used real objects and food in her **emerging imitative play**. In their efforts to support and extend her play, educators offered Nancy home-made playdough and modelled making and sharing food. Nancy copied this play for a while before gradually **developing literal pretend play** on her own and with a few friends.

The layers of play help educators to better understand the importance of their role in providing **intentional guidance**. How to support and extend children’s play whilst respecting their agenda is possibly the most difficult skill asked of educators yet we would want every child to enjoy **deepening imaginative play**. For some this will only become possible with the sensitive intentional guidance from knowledgeable and nurturing educators. You might model using a resource to stand for something else, e.g. you pretend a block is a phone. You might, as the educator did with S, suggest, e.g. ‘I think the babies are cold this morning, I can hear them crying, why don’t we put some clothes on them.’ Stories will be told and acted out, open-ended resources provided for children to make their own creations to use in their play. For one group of children who had experienced lighting a fire earlier in the week, it was important to have resources such as logs, twigs etc. for them to pretend to make and light a fire and melt marshmallows over their pretend fire.

First-hand real-life experiences lead to rich and deeper play. Throughout the months of practice-led research, educators observed many play scenarios where children used their first-hand experiences in their play. Sophie and Emma had spent the morning chopping vegetables to put in the stir-fry which they and peers enjoyed tasting. Later that day, the two girls used mud, leaves, twigs and water to make their own stir-fry in the mud kitchen. Other children were called to share the delicacy once it was ready. An educator had observed Mohammed scooping and pouring the water as he sat in a large, deep puddle. She then introduced him to the mud kitchen and modelled scooping and pouring there. He went on to spend a long time exploring the possibilities afforded him in the mud kitchen.

Involving parents is key. Educators found they needed to understand more about children’s play and experiences at home. They also needed to support parents to understand and value the way the setting views play and its place in development and learning. Not all families view play in the same way as the research settings do. This is a

never-ending dialogue and requires open-mindedness, complete lack of judgement and assumptions. A more-informed, deeper understanding of each family's heritage and views of play really supports educators to be able to better support the child's play. One family had no toys at home in their flat because their experience of play had been living on a large farm in Nigeria where the children spent all day outside playing with what nature provided. Susie, born into Lockdown in March 2020, had spent her first three years of life cocooned with her parents always playing with either one. She needed much support to play with children rather than only with an adult. Her parents supported this by inviting another child to play with Susie at home.

The adult role is crucial in supporting and extending children's play. Sometimes being an interested observer is all that is required, watch the video of R playing the saucepans as drums. He knows there is an interested adult nearby, he knows that she is so interested she is videoing him, he doesn't look at her or acknowledge her but he is aware of her presence. For N and her creation of Rapunzel's tower with the blocks, the adult's role was to protect the space and time for her so that she could build and play uninterrupted.

Specific authentic appreciation supports children to play. At other times or for other children, it is important to verbally recognize what they are doing in order to encourage more of the same, e.g. "You wrapped that baby so carefully." "You shared that 'food' so that each member of the 'family' has the same amount." Narrating children's actions in play promotes its development, "Oh no, the train has derailed, another train is coming to help with the rescue."

Listening carefully and modelling language used by children in their play subtly supports their **acquisition of language**. For instance, see the video of Rafael who is in the home corner observed by his Key Person. She repeats his word of 'ot' by saying "it's **hot**, you'll need to be careful," Rafael in turn repeats back to the adult "areful." He doesn't need the educator to play with him but he does draw her in by talking to her and she responds with sensitivity, supporting his language whilst not interrupting his play.

Relationships matter and authentic observation by skillful, sensitive and attuned-to-each-child educators promotes knowing the children very well and therefore helps educators to find suitable co-players for individual children. It was important that the first few children educators encouraged and supported Susie to play with were similarly quiet, watchful and sensitive like her.

Reflection with Guidance. Reflective discussions support the continuous development and transformation of practice. Play is hugely complex and requires continuous reflective dialogue that causes educators to think and then to make changes, some very slight, to their provision and practice.

Froebelian Practice Prompts

- **Be conscious of the language** we use in order to avoid reinforcing cultural or gender stereotypes.
- **Be comfortable with challenge.** We must ask ourselves: are we ok with the boys choosing never to play with the dolls? If we're not, what do we do?
- Use the layers of play to recognise which children need more help to engage in play and to develop their play.
- Use the layers of play to provide the most developmentally appropriate **intentional guidance**.
- **Provide equity:** Some children need more support and guidance than others and our role is to ensure this occurs.
- Do not assume all children cook, garden, sew etc. at home. It is important to provide such first-hand, real-life experiences which children will draw on as they play.
- Educators need to build trusting relationships with families in order to better understand children's play and experiences at home. This will also support parent's understanding of the setting's views on play and its role in developing learning.

- **Give specific authentic appreciation e.g.** “I like the way you cooked the dinner for Ella. I really loved the way you looked after the babies in the home corner.”
- Consider **groupings of children** in play. Encourage and support a child to play with another child with similar needs and interests.
- **Make time for reflective dialogue.** The Reflection with Guidance tool will help.
- **Use the Layers of Play** to support adults in observing, supporting and extending children through play. See document entitled Layers of Play-helping play to work.

Further reading

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