



Elevating Education to
Excellence for Impact

Play-Based Learning

A Framework for Joyful, Future-Ready Education

*Nurturing Cognitive, Social, and Emotional
Development Through Play*



March 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Yes, it is play. Yes, it doesn't look orderly. Yes, pinpointing exact learning moments seems challenging. Teachers may feel unprepared, and parents may question its value when learning is not immediately visible. And yet play remains one of the most powerful and enduring ways human beings learn.

Play-based learning is a rigorous strategic framework where teachers intentionally design experiences that align with learning goals while preserving children's curiosity. It is a strategic shift from transmission-style teaching to deep, inquiry-driven understanding, where learners actively construct knowledge through thoughtfully designed experiences.

This approach is no longer optional. NEP 2020 and the NCF recognise that 85% of brain development occurs by age six and call for a joyful, experiential foundational stage rooted in Indian Knowledge Systems that value observation and discovery. For school leaders, this represents a critical evolution from teacher-centred delivery to learner-centred agency, prioritising depth over speed and competence over compliance. Research from UNICEF and global longitudinal studies confirms that play-based learning strengthens cognitive competencies, executive functioning, emotional regulation, and complex problem-solving skills that traditional rote methods simply cannot develop.

Play is not the absence of learning; it is the presence of engagement, joy, and deep cognitive processing. When children play with purpose, they develop skills that textbooks alone cannot teach.” – Adapted from Research, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Schools remaining tethered to ineffective rote methods risk institutional obsolescence, marked by student disengagement, learning poverty, and rising academic stress. Embracing play-based pedagogy is the most effective vehicle for achieving true academic rigour and future readiness. The evidence is clear, and the clock is ticking.

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SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

Key Findings



Many teachers hesitate to adopt play-based learning because they see play as noisy, messy, and hard to control, often mistaking it for unstructured free time rather than a research-backed systematic way of learning. Let's explore how schools can thoughtfully integrate play into teaching and enable teachers to create education systems that prepare children for the future.

Play-based learning

Play-based learning is a **purposeful** approach that uses play as a means to achieve meaningful learning outcomes. Teachers should **thoughtfully align learning goals** with children's interests to make it purposeful play ([Berk et al., 2025](#)). It places children at the centre of learning, encouraging exploration, problem-solving, collaboration, and reflection through well-designed experiences **guided by teachers**.

This clearly shows that play-based learning:

- is not a mindless invitation to run around or throw sand in the air
- is purposeful
- has to be thoughtfully aligned by teachers with learning goals
- requires teachers to carefully craft and guide these experiences



Play-based learning is not something about merely making everyone happy but is strongly grounded in learning sciences ([Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009](#)). This approach supports cognitive and motor skills development, builds strong foundations in literacy and numeracy, wellbeing, essential life skills, and 21st-century skills, making learning engaging, rigorous, and developmentally appropriate ([NEP 2020](#); [NCF-FS 2022](#); [NCF 2023](#)).

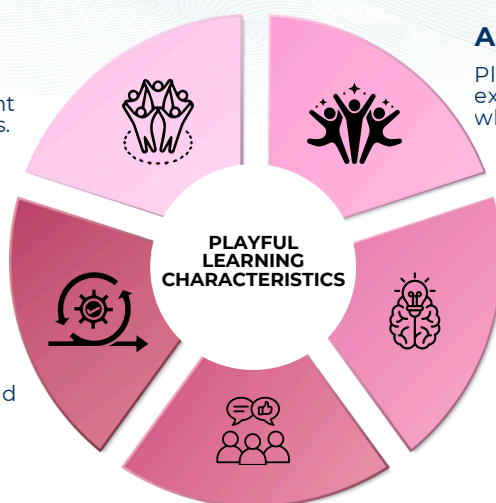
Let's explore this pedagogy in detail:

E. SOCIALLY INTERACTIVE

Learning happens together. Children talk, collaborate, negotiate, and learn from different perspectives while building strong social skills.

D. ITERATIVE

Learning is a process of trying, adjusting, and trying again. Mistakes are welcomed, and persistence helps children grow confidence and mastery.



A. JOYFUL

Playful learning feels good. Children experience excitement, curiosity, and satisfaction, especially when they overcome challenges.

B. MEANINGFUL

Learning connects to what children care about. When activities relate to their lives and interests, students understand why they are learning and take ownership of it.

C. ACTIVELY ENGAGING

Children are fully involved; thinking, moving, talking, and exploring. They are deeply focused, hands-on with materials, and absorbed in solving problems.

Pedagogy of Play

A pedagogy of play, grounded in learning sciences, recognises play as a powerful pathway for cognitive, social, emotional, and academic learning when learners are curious, engaged, and willing to explore ([Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009](#)). Playful learning is intentional: teachers set clear learning goals while learners exercise agency in how they explore and construct understanding ([Zosh et al., 2017](#)), allowing teachers to focus explicit instruction where essential. Effective practice moves flexibly across a continuum from child-led free play to guided play with adult scaffolding to structured play aligned with curricular outcomes based on developmental stage and learning intent. While play is universal, cultural and school contexts shape its expression, requiring locally defined approaches. Play flourishes in school cultures that value trust, collaboration, and reflective practice ([Project Zero; Mardell et al., 2023; IJCRT, 2025](#)). In this play-based learning approach, adults must respect children's agency and intrinsic motivation while striking a balance between sustained shared thinking (collaborative intellectual engagement where both adult and child contribute ideas) and scaffolding (supporting learning within the Zone of Proximal Development) ([Pete King., 2025](#)).



Why Play-Based Learning Works

Play-based learning matters because it aligns with **how children actually learn**. Learning science, neuroscience, and global education research consistently show that children learn best when they are **actively engaged, emotionally safe, curious, and meaningfully involved**.

Key research insights at a glance

Cognitive Development

Builds planning, memory, and control flexible thinking, leading, stronger
→ Stronger problem-solving predicts success and reasoning, and knowledge transfer.

Language & Literacy

Creates meaningful reasons to talk, listen,
→ narrative skill through authentic storytelling and language play, making meaningful

Creativity & Innovation

Encourages imagination and divergent thinking
→ Greater original and flexible problem-solving and creative learning.

Social & Emotional Growth

Develops empathy, develops communication,
→ communication, emotional regulation, social resilience, emotional intelligence, and positive social behaviour

Physical & Motor Skills

Strengthens coordination, balance, and motor skills.
→ Outdoor and fine motor skills, enhances physical fitness through active play

Motivation & Engagement

Playing feels joyful and purposeful, This
→ Deeper engagement, persistence, and improved learning retention

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CHALLENGES OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING

(And How to Address Them)

Challenges	Solution
Perceived Lack of Academic Rigour	Educate stakeholders that play-based learning aligns with curriculum standards and develops foundational skills effectively. Use assessment data to demonstrate learning outcomes.
Limited Teacher Training	Invest in professional development focused on play-based pedagogy, observation techniques, and facilitation skills.
Resource and Space Constraints	Utilise low-cost, high-quality materials (loose parts, natural materials, recyclables). Redesign existing spaces to be flexible and play-friendly.
Time Management	Integrate play into the curriculum rather than treating it as separate. Plan intentional play experiences linked to learning objectives.
Parental Misconceptions	Transparent communication showing how play develops literacy, numeracy, and future-ready skills.

Challenges faced gradewise:

Foundation

Teachers rely on **written text** on the worksheets to teach addition and subtraction because students appear “too playful” and struggle to complete the written work.



Use **manipulative-based play** such as dice games and pretend shops. Students solve problems by rolling dice, exchanging objects, grouping items, and role-playing buyer-seller situations.



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Middle School

Teachers rely on lectures to **explain** ecosystems because experiments feel time-consuming and hard to manage for such topics.

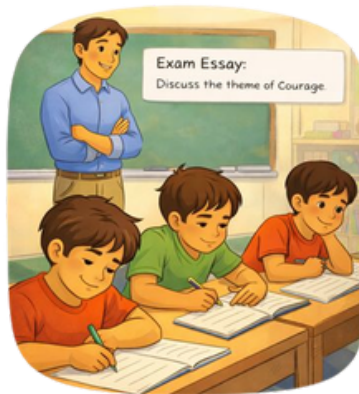


Use **role-play and model-building** where students simulate food chains or design mini-ecosystems using simple materials



Secondary

Writing becomes exam-focused and mechanical in higher grades.



Use **creative reinterpretation** like podcasts, mock interviews, alternative endings, or debates on themes. This will allow them to be creative thinkers before writing.



Well-designed play-based learning strengthens literacy, numeracy, reasoning, and higher-order thinking while improving retention and transfer of learning. It builds deep understanding, executive functions, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. Play-based learning is a purposeful, research-backed pedagogy that balances academic rigour with well-being.

THE IMPERATIVE FOR CHANGE:

Why Your School Must Act Now

According to the Annual Status of Education Report (**ASER**) a significant percentage of children complete primary school without achieving basic literacy and numeracy competencies. This is not from children's inability to learn but from pedagogical approaches that fail to engage their natural learning abilities.

- **Policy mandate, not choice:** NEP 2020 and NCF clearly state that learning in the foundational and preparatory years should be Foundational and Preparatory. Schools adopting play are fulfilling policy, not experimenting.
- **Skills for the future:** Creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, adaptability, empathy, and self-regulation cannot be taught through memorisation. Play develops these skills naturally and holistically.
- **Play supports every child:** Play-based learning is inclusive by design. It respects different abilities, learning styles, and backgrounds, giving every child a way to participate and succeed.
- **Schools that act now lead the future:** Play-based schools see stronger student outcomes, higher parent trust, more fulfilled teachers, and alignment with national and global best practices.
- **Build a culture of trust and joy:** It creates a classroom where mistakes are welcomed, voices are heard, and learning feels meaningful and engaging.

To promote and sustain play-based learning, heads and leaders must move beyond isolated classroom activities to foster a **comprehensive schoolwide culture** that values experimentation, shared inquiry, and trust ([Borisova et al., 2018](#); [Pete King 2025](#); [Bergen D., 2002](#)).

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IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP

Phase 1:

Establishing a Shared Vision

Before changing practice, the school community must agree on why play matters.

- **Define Play in Your Context:** Create a shared picture of what playful learning looks and feels like in your school. Go ahead, ask your students.
- **Agree on Core Indicators:** Anchor practice around three essentials, which are learner agency, curiosity and exploration, and joy in learning.
- **Align School Vision:** Embed play-based learning into the school mission so teachers feel safe to innovate.



Phase 2:

Remove Structural Barriers

Traditional school systems often work against play. Leadership must redesign them.

- **Flexible Timetables:** Create longer learning blocks that allow deep, uninterrupted play and inquiry.
- **Supportive Class Sizes:** Ensure teacher-child ratios that allow teachers to observe, guide, and scaffold learning.
- **Purposeful Resources:** Invest in open-ended materials and “loose parts” (e.g., boxes, natural items, manipulatives), not only textbooks and worksheets.

IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP

Phase 3:

Design Play-Ready Learning Environments

Learning spaces and curriculum must invite exploration.

- **Play-Friendly Spaces:** Create flexible classrooms with learning areas for building, role play, imagining and sensory exploration.
- **Curriculum Integration:** Embed play into literacy, numeracy, and science using guided play aligned to learning goals.
- **Beyond the Classroom:** Use outdoor and community spaces to extend learning and movement.
- **Play for child and not adult:** The child must be convinced it is play. Teachers might hasten to couch any activity as play. This takes time to inculcate.



Phase 4:

Develop Playful Professional Culture

Teachers need to experience play to teach through it.

- **Playful Onboarding:** Introduce school values through hands-on, interactive experiences.
- **Peer Support:** Build mentoring systems that encourage experimentation rather than compliance.
- **Teacher Inquiry:** Use documentation and reflection to help teachers learn from the practices.

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Phase 5:

Partner with Families

Parents must understand that play is serious learning.

- **Make Learning Visible:** Share photos, stories, and examples that show learning within play.
- **Parent Participation:** Create opportunities for families to share games, stories, skills, and traditions.
- **Extend Play Home:** Offer simple ideas for playful learning in everyday routines.



Phase 6:

Reflect, Assess, and Improve

Sustaining play requires ongoing reflection, not a one-time change.

- **Use Formative Assessment:** Observe learning, collect portfolios, and track growth beyond test scores.
- **Review Policies:** Identify and adapt school rules that limit playful learning.
- **Improve Iteratively:** Treat implementation as a cycle of trying, learning, and refining.

STUDENT BENEFITS & PARENT COMMUNICATION

Play-based learning is a child-centred educational approach that utilises play as the primary medium for development to foster **holistic growth** across cognitive, social-emotional, language, and physical domains.

- **Cognitive Development:** Play promotes critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and executive functions such as planning and flexibility. Hands-on activities with materials like blocks and puzzles support spatial reasoning and early mathematical thinking.
- **Social-Emotional Growth:** Collaborative play helps students develop empathy, self-regulation, confidence, and resilience as they learn to manage emotions and resolve conflicts in a supportive environment.
- **Language and Literacy:** Through play, children engage in meaningful conversations, storytelling, and questioning, which strengthen vocabulary, communication skills, and narrative understanding that are essential for reading comprehension.
- **Physical Well-being:** Active and hands-on play builds gross and fine motor skills, coordination, and sensory development, contributing to overall physical health.

Parent's Guide towards Play-Based Learning

Parents' and caregivers' being a child's **most influential teachers for** promoting learning through play.

- **Design purposeful environments:** Set up spaces with open-ended materials ("blocks, loose parts, sheets of paper and tools) that invite exploration and problem-solving, rather than giving step-by-step tasks.
- **Hold learning intentions, not scripts:** Be clear about the learning goals, but allow children multiple pathways to reach them. Guide the learning without controlling it.
- **Observe before intervening:** Watch how students play, think, and interact. Use these observations to decide when to step in, what to ask, or when to step back.
- **Use questions to extend thinking:** Ask open-ended questions such as "What do you think will happen next?" or "How else could we try this?" before giving answers.
- **Model curiosity and risk-taking:** Show that it's okay to try, fail, and rethink. When adults wonder aloud and experiment, students feel safe to do the same.
- **Value process over product:** Focus feedback on effort, strategies, collaboration, and thinking—not just the final outcome.

Play-based learning acts like a **laboratory for life**; just as a scientist uses a lab to safely test hypotheses and discover how the world works, a child uses play to experiment with social roles (**Bergen D., 2002**), physical laws, and cognitive challenges. Through intentional play, teachers design richer learning experiences that strengthen literacy, numeracy, reasoning, and higher-order thinking. The play-based learning restores joy and motivation, powerful drivers of long-term learning.

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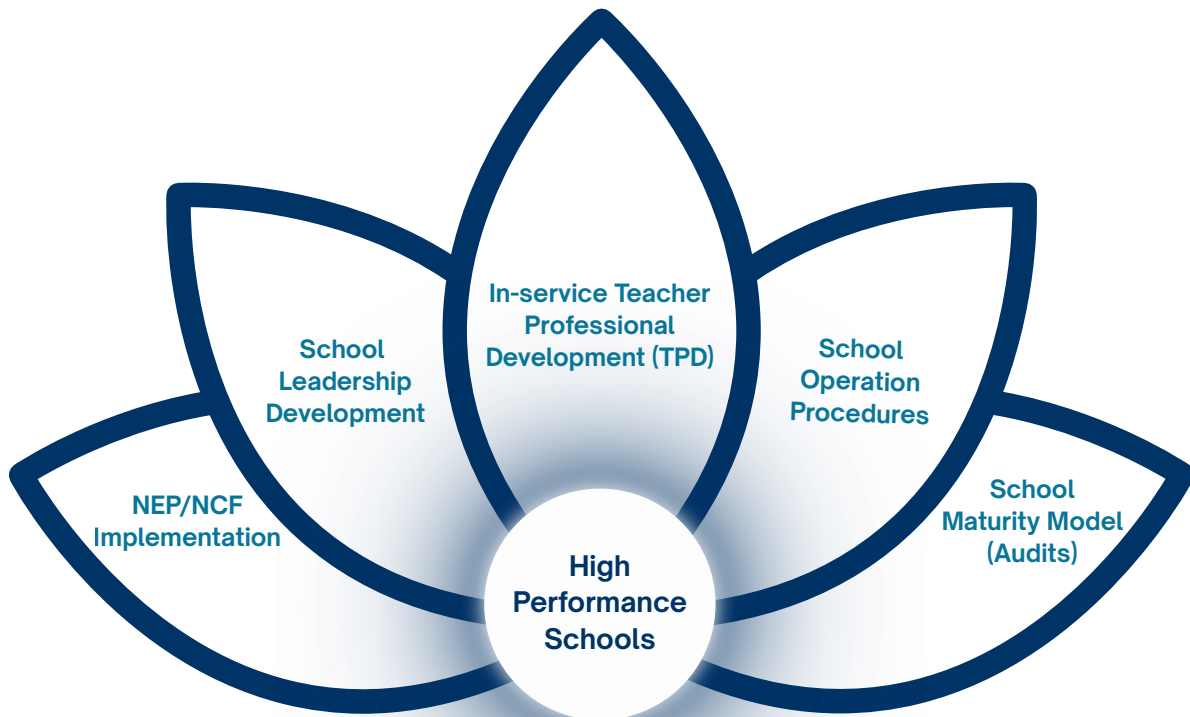
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PARTNER WITH US

This report is the beginning of a conversation. We understand that designing and implementing play-based learning is far more complex than simply reading about it. That is why we invite you to connect with us and discuss your specific context, so we can work together to tailor an approach that best fits your school's unique needs.



LET'S BUILD THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION, TOGETHER.

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