

Importance of play for young children

When children enter through our school doors at the tender age of 2+, they are inquisitive little creatures, asking lots of questions and are not frightened to take risks. As educators we are privileged in being given this opportunity to work with these children and to impart upon them knowledge and skills which will support them through their early childhood lives. Very young children are like little sponges soaking up everything we say and do and more often than not are willing to give everything a go after time spent observing those around them. Key to the way in which a successful Early Years education is planned is through well-structured play activities which enable these new skills and knowledge to be developed in a secure, inspiring learning environment. Many of the children, who enter the Foundation Stage at the British School of Beijing, arrive with little or no English, but what they all have in common is a desire to experience new opportunities, make friends and learn.



What are they learning through play?

Many parents, when arriving in China and Beijing for the first time, are faced with the problem of choosing from a wealth of Early Years providers. BSB delivers the 'Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)' from the UK which has play based learning at its core. It acknowledges that all children are unique, and that they learn and develop at different rates and in different ways. By play we mean well planned learning opportunities where learning is fun, challenging and often spontaneous. It helps children to bring together and build upon all their life experiences in 6 areas of learning.



The EYFS is planned through 6 areas which are: Communication, Language and Literacy (this encompasses Speaking and Listening, Reading and Writing), Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy (this includes all Mathematics skills), Creative Development (Art, Music and all things creative), Knowledge and Understanding of the World (History, Geography and Science), Physical Development (gross and fine motor skills) and more importantly Personal, Social and Emotional Development. We acknowledge that a happy child, who feels safe and secure in their environment, is a willing learner who learns through their play.

Through play the children are learning a range of new skills, knowledge and vocabulary. They grow in confidence and levels of independence by making choices for themselves, develop social skills and begin to understand the consequences of their actions. Within the first few weeks of their Early Years education the children often come home telling their parents about the lovely fun play things they have been doing in school. When questioned by parents about what they have done that day in school they may say 'I painted all day' or 'I played in the house'.

Their learning is planned so that some of their time will be spent with an adult working on specific play based activities, with lots of questioning and talk, and also time spent working independently making choices

for themselves and being encouraged to try lots of new things. But what they do not realise is that they have spent all day learning and that the learning is done through play.

It is just as important to educate our parents in the way in which our children learn and are educated. Very early on in the school term all new parents are invited in to listen to a presentation about the EYFS curriculum and the day to day routines of school life. This is a great opportunity for parents to ask any questions and learn more about the ways in which children are supported in their learning and can support them at home.

Modern challenges to play (TV, video etc)



We are very fortunate at BSB to have Interactive Whiteboards (IWB) and personal computers in every classroom to support our teaching, but these need to be supported by practical real life experiences. Children learn in many ways and play is an important way of encouraging new skills and knowledge to be developed. In modern society where technology is everywhere we look, it is sometimes hard to compete with the pull of flashing lights and loud music computer games which keep our children quietly entertained for hours at a time. However, these are often solitary acts, where children are not given the opportunity to develop their language and social skills. As much as it is important to give children the opportunity to try and develop their ICT skills we need to develop and nurture 'well rounded

individuals' who will have the skills to complete all the challenges facing them in life.

When asked to describe your classroom as an Early Years teacher one of the areas that often inspire us is the 'role play' corner. This area changes regularly and may be set up as a house, a garage or even a jungle. This is a wonderful area within any Early Years classroom where children can act out different roles, develop their vocabulary of a new topic through child initiated play and collaborate on activities. The children are encouraged to take an active role in adding to this area by creating props, signs and labels. For children with limited English it is an area where new vocabulary of a topic is informally developed. It is a wonderful sight to see when the child in your class who arrived with no English is observed serving tea to one of their peers using appropriate vocabulary.

Play is not limited to the indoor classroom environment and there are plentiful opportunities planned to take the learning outside. Some children who feel confined within the limits of the four walls of a classroom will thrive in the outdoors and may use imaginative vocabulary beyond their years. Numeracy lessons can be taken outside and 'counting on' can be done by jumping along a number line; letter formation may involve using the paint brushes to paint the playground. Children are given the opportunity to try things in as many ways as humanly imaginable and learn in a much more exciting way than I am sure many of our children's parents were exposed to.

As the School holidays approach, many parents may panic about how they will keep their children entertained all day, without propping them up in front of the television or computer. After a long term spent playing, practising letters and numbers the children will be sent home to their parents ready for a rest and to recharge their batteries after a lively, eventful term. For those busy parents who work full time there are super ways of keeping children busy and socialised, in a fun and exciting way. Beijing is abundant with parks, historical sites which are just waiting to be seen through the eyes of a child.

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