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When play becomes a very serious business



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The battle lines have been drawn in the sandboxes. As a new curriculum for under-5s is to be ready by September, early years experts are getting passionate over the definition of play.

The Early Years Foundation Stage brings together guidance for under-3s and over-3s. It sets standards for children to reach by the age of 5: they should be able to write their own name and understand the difference between right and wrong, for instance.

The framework will become statutory for childminders and all state, private, voluntary and independent nurseries.

The debate is between two camps: the first fears that the new educational outcomes for 5-year-olds - which are now linked with developmental milestones for babies - will result in the end of childhood. The reason, they say, is because these young children will suddenly find themselves in a world where hitting targets will be more important than play. A conference in London tomorrow will discuss this view.

The second camp eschews such an apocalyptic approach. They argue that the framework, which

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encourages children to make dens, dress up, dance and sing, will enhance children's play and make it more meaningful.

Sue Palmer, a literacy consultant and author of *Toxic Childhood*, said: "Play can mean anything that isn't work. The important difference is between free-flow play and structured play. The foundation stage is about structured play. It is play controlled by adults. It is predicated on an educational approach and that is what I'm opposed to. The reading and writing targets dominate it. I want children to read and write, but I think what is stopping them is the loss of other parts of childhood."

Kathy Sylva, professor of educational psychology at Oxford University, disagrees. She said: "The settings where 3- and 4-year-olds have very good educational as well as social and behavioural outcomes, have about a fifty-fifty balance between activities guided by the teacher and free play. Guided doesn't mean sitting on the mat. Baking a cake is something children couldn't do in free play."

In a paper for the Cambridge University primary review, Usha Goswami of Cambridge University and Peter Bryant of Oxford Brookes University concluded that thinking, reasoning and understanding can be enhanced by imaginative play, but to do this the teacher does need to intervene.

While play arouses passions in a way no other aspect of the framework has, there are other issues for debate. Supporters and opponents share a concern over the literacy goals. The foundation stage states children aged 5 should be able to read a range of familiar words and use some phonic knowledge to do so. The more fundamental objection is whether there should be a national curriculum for preschool children at all. The 23 Steiner schools do not teach reading until 7. They do not want to be forced to follow a curriculum which expects children to begin phonics by 5.

But inspectors' reports appear to back the need for some sort of standardisation in the early years. In 2005, Ofsted visited 45 day nurseries during the first hour of the day. It found that a third had inadequate care at that time.

The Government's 10-year childcare strategy revealed that those working with pre-school children include both poorly paid unqualified staff to teachers. In 2002, around 30 per cent of staff in day nurseries were unqualified.

Iram Siraj-Blatchford, professor of early childhood education at London's Institute of Education, said: "I think the foundation stage is too heavy on literacy for children from 40 to 60 months. But I would not jump from that to say deregulate the whole private and voluntary sector and not have this framework."

So, will the foundation stage lead to less play or more? There are concerns that one child may spend less time being a superhero and more time "writing", but there is also the desire that another child could be spending more time drawing cartoons and less time watching them.

Play is children's work. It is their way of learning and preparing for adulthood. Any curriculum will not in itself ensure or deny children play. That is down to the teachers involved.

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