

Play and learning pack

Home corner (Dramatic and pretend play)

An intentional teaching resource

September 2026

This Play and Learning Pack on home corner was designed to help early childhood teachers, educators and leaders understand intentional teaching and how to strengthen it in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services.

About the early childhood intentional teaching model and supporting resources

These Play and Learning Packs were used in the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)'s [2025 research](#) to develop and test an [intentional teaching model and supporting resources](#). For this research, we used an iterative design-based methodology, working alongside educators from 13 diverse ECEC services. The resources provided information on foundational knowledge, beliefs and practices that support play-based learning with intentionality.

This series of resources supports more effective intentional teaching. These Play and Learning Packs were designed to help early childhood teachers, educators and leaders understand:

- what intentional teaching is
- what it looks like in practice
- how to strengthen it in their settings.

The Play and Learning Packs complement an intentional teaching model AERO developed with ECEC services. The model, the practice resource and the Play and Learning Packs, emerged directly from that research collaboration.

The intentional teaching model and supporting resources bring evidence-based approaches for effective intentional teaching together with the wisdom of educators and teachers to ensure both evidence-informed rigor and usefulness in everyday practice.

How to use this Play and Learning Pack

This pack is intended to support your use of AERO's intentional teaching model and practice resource. Focusing attention on a specific aspect of the program will support you in setting learning intentions for children and broader program goals. Using a stepped approach to guide your reflections supports you in engaging in meaningful planning for individual children and the whole group.



Step 1: Observation and reflection

Spend some time reflecting on the opportunities you provide for dramatic and pretend play. This could be in a dedicated 'home corner' or elsewhere within the environment.

Read the information in this pack and ask yourself:

- What are our learning intentions for this area?
- How are the children playing there now?
- What kind of learning is happening?
- How does the environment support this?

Identify what opportunities you provide for different kinds of dramatic and pretend play, and whether there are enough resources and props available to stimulate children's interest and imagination. Consider what other opportunities you could provide.

An interesting and stimulating learning environment provides the foundation for meaningful and engaging play. This, in turn, helps us identify and set meaningful learning intentions.



Step 2: Planning for learning

Use the Intentional Teaching Thinking Tool to identify 'what stands out' from your observations and to plan your learning intentions.

Use your learning intentions to plan what you will do to achieve them.

Record your plans using the Intentional Teaching Planning Format.

Implement your plans.



Step 3: Reflection and evaluation

Continue to implement your plans, reviewing and evaluating them regularly, and using the thinking tool to continue to plan your next steps. Reflect on the impact of your intentions and teaching strategies for educators, children and families.

Learning in home corner — Dramatic and pretend play

Dramatic and pretend play is an incredibly important part of young children's development.

Through pretend play, children:

- act out and process their understandings of the world
- develop the ability to see the world from different perspectives as they take on and try out different roles
- develop their imaginations and creative thinking skills and learn to cooperate as they develop shared imaginative play scenarios.

Significantly, dramatic and pretend play is a key contributor to the development of communication and literacy skills. Telling and acting out stories develops children's language skills and provides a valuable foundation for later literacy development. The ability to symbolically represent objects in pretend play (e.g., pretending that a block is a mobile phone) is also a key thinking skill that makes a vital contribution to literacy development and the understanding that words symbolically represent the ideas that they convey.

Dramatic and pretend play can happen anywhere, but one of the key locations for such play in ECEC services is 'home corner'. A well-organised home corner provides props and resources to stimulate children's pretend play. The set-up of home corner can be changed from time to time to suit children's play interests. These could include a home/kitchen, restaurant, shop, school, campsite, hospital or vet's surgery.

While props and resources are important for stimulating pretend play, they don't need to be extremely realistic. Provided that they 'suggest' the kind of situation that children might play out, they will do their job. In fact, it's often beneficial if props aren't too realistic, as this encourages children to use their imaginations to pretend that an object is something else.

Pretend play also provides a great context within which other learning can occur. In this way, it can be an excellent opportunity to achieve 'back-of-mind' intentions in relation to a range of learning areas.

For example, playing at shopping can be used to encourage writing shopping lists or making signs to show what's for sale (literacy), or pricing items and using play money to pay for goods purchased (maths). Similarly, restaurant play can easily lead into writing menus and recipes, while hospital or vet play might lead to examining x-rays or talking about the body and what might be wrong with it (science and physical wellbeing).

The development of pretend play

Pretend play develops through a number of stages that mirror a child's overall development.

Younger children (Babies and toddlers)

For very young children, their play is usually oriented towards exploring their environment. When pretend play materials (such as toy food or pots and cooking utensils) are available, they usually use them for heuristic (discovery) play – exploring their physical properties by manipulating, shaking, banging or mouthing them, building their understanding of how objects look, feel, sound and work.

Older babies and toddlers will start to use pretend play materials in ways that more closely reflect their real-world purposes. Such play is usually based on imitation of familiar people, routines and activities. Children at this age often mimic actions that they have seen the adults in their lives do (e.g., talking on a phone, stirring a pot, putting a tray in the oven).

Many pretend play resources also lend themselves to the kind of functional and schematic types of play that children at this age love. Filling a large pot with toy food might look like cooking, but for younger toddlers, is just as likely to be about enjoying the action of filling and emptying a container. Similarly, filling a bag or bucket with small toys to carry across the room could be the beginning of pretend shopping play, but is more likely to be an expression of the classic toddler action of collecting and dumping!

These experiences are helping to lay the foundation for future imaginative and pretend play.

Older children (Toddlers, preschoolers and beyond)

As their thinking skills and imaginations develop, children's play becomes more imaginative, and older toddlers will increasingly engage with pretend play materials to deliberately pretend to do something. Their 'scripts' for such play are usually simple to begin with (e.g., offering a pretend cup of tea to anyone who will take one) but quickly develop in their complexity and sophistication.

Older children's play builds on these early experiences, and is both more complex and, increasingly, more social. Children begin to take on roles – pretending to be someone or something else in a pretend situation – and also to create and negotiate the play scenarios in which these roles feature. Children become adept at stepping out of the play to 'set the scene' (e.g., 'Let's be a family and I'm the mum and you're the dad and you're the children and we're going on a picnic') before stepping back in to take on the roles they have agreed to.

As children's pretend play develops further, it becomes even more imaginative and isn't necessarily tied to real events that children have observed and are re-enacting. Instead, they're able to invent completely fictional play scenarios and take on purely imaginary roles that may draw on stories, tv shows or movies that they have seen – such as being princesses or fairies or superheroes.

Adults' role in pretend play

The adult role in dramatic and pretend play is largely to facilitate and guide the children's play.

This can be through planning and setting up the pretend play environment with props and resources to encourage the children's play around a particular theme or topic.

Observing children as they play is an opportunity to assess their communication and social skills and also provides a valuable window into children's lives. What children 'act out' in their pretend play is often highly reflective of their own experience.

Facilitating and scaffolding the play by asking questions and providing support can help children solve problems and resolve conflicts that may arise. A well-placed question can also be an important opportunity to challenge and extend children's thinking.

Finally, where appropriate, adults may participate in children's pretend play. This could be as simple as accepting the offer of a 'meal' or 'cup of tea', or could involve taking on a more significant role.

In either case, your aim should be to join in the play without dominating it. Participation, however, can be a valuable opportunity to model respectful interactions, introduce new ideas or vocabulary, or gently guide children's behaviour.

Learning potentials of dramatic and pretend play

Learning area	Potential learning	Links to learning outcomes
Social skills	- Cooperating to playing out a 'pretend' situation with peers - Sharing and negotiating (e.g., resources, props and roles)	- Identity - Connection - Wellbeing - Effective communicators
Communication	- Sequencing events and storytelling - Communicating with peers to develop collaborative play scenarios - Using language and vocabulary appropriate to roles that are undertaken (e.g., the language of a waiter in a restaurant, or the cashier in a shop) - Opportunities to incorporate literacy and writing into pretend play (e.g., making signs, menus, taking orders)	- Connection - Confident and Involved learners - Effective communicators
Emotional skills	- Taking turns, sharing resources and engaging in social play supports the development of self-regulation and emotional development - Role playing and pretend play can assist with the development of identity	- Identity - Wellbeing
Creativity and imagination	- Developing imaginary play scenarios - Taking on (and imagining) the perspectives of different characters and roles	- Confident and involved learners - Effective communicators
Physical skills	Development of self-help skills in putting on and taking off dress-up clothes and costumes, using play utensils and other props	Wellbeing
Content knowledge	Incidental learning that arises from particular play scenarios (e.g., knowledge about the body and health during hospital play; vocabulary related to specific props or resources, maths learning such as using money, counting objects for sale in shopping play)	- Connection - Confident and involved learners - Effective communicators

Intentional teaching planning format

This template is informed by AERO's intentional teaching model and practice resource. These resources will support an understanding of intentional teaching and completion of this planning resource.

Group:**Date:****Area:**

Context/Background

What has been happening in this area recently? Who has been involved? What learning seems most prominent? What are the children most interested in?

Learning intentions

Front-of-mind (short-term) goals: What is your main learning focus for this area for this period of time? Try to keep this to one to 3 goals max.

Back-of-mind (long-term) goals: What other learning goals are you keeping in the back of your mind in case there is an opportunity to pursue them? Keep this to 5 goals max.

Learning provisions

Resources and materials: What specific resources and materials will you provide to support your learning intentions? How will you set them up?

Learning provisions

Planned experiences: Are there any pre-planned and/or adult-guided experiences you will plan for this area? If so, include details.

Teaching strategies: Based on your learning intentions, what teaching strategies are going to be most important to use to successfully achieve them?

Evaluation

What happened? Remember to focus on what learning occurred rather than just what the children did.

What next? Based on what happened, what is the next phase for this learning? Will you simplify, consolidate, extend or challenge what you have observed? Or will you change your focus and introduce something new?