

Small World Play

Play in the EYFS

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About the book

This book is intended to be a practical resource for practitioners to use in their daily work with children in the Early Years Foundation Stage. It need not be read from start to finish, but should be available to all staff within childcare and education settings, so that practitioners may dip into it whenever they need ideas or inspiration on a particular topic, or more general advice and guidance on the uses and values of small world play.

Part 1 explains clearly how and why young children need and benefit from this type of play and how it can contribute to their learning and development in all areas, as well as providing enjoyment and strengthening bonds and relationships. Practitioners are encouraged to teach and support small world play with children throughout the early years and beyond, using a variety of resources from traditional wooden blocks to detailed characters and models.

Part 2 covers in detail a different small world theme, such as people, animals, vehicles and buildings, and demonstrate



Familiar themes such as schools and playgrounds are popular with children in their small world play.



Children can build simple structures for small people with traditional wooden blocks.

how the suggested games and activities can be linked to the early learning goals within the three prime and four specific areas of learning and development, as well as the characteristics of effective learning.

The links to the early learning goals contain some overlap and slight repetition between chapters and themes. This is necessary to allow each chapter to work as a stand alone resource, so that they may be read in any order and need not rely on previous knowledge or having read any particular chapter before another. In this way, practitioners may always follow the interests of their children and encourage play that is appropriately stimulating and challenging, ensuring that children will wish to continue to engage with and learn from the activities as they reach each new age and stage of development.

Each idea offered is intended as an example or a starting point, from which practitioners and children can create their own games and stories, explore and experiment

with their own ideas, work on their own chosen tasks and set their own challenges. Through absorbing and satisfying play within an enabling environment, children can learn and acquire new skills, build positive relationships among their peers and with adults, increase concentration, perseverance and stamina. They can plan, review and think critically, solve their own problems and develop as individuals, at a pace that is right for them.

Ideas may be adapted appropriately by adults working with children of all ages, at all stages and at all levels of ability, including the very able and those with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). Small world play with popular characters and mixed resources can be particularly successful for groups of children of mixed ages and ability levels, with the guidance and support of experienced practitioners.

The possibilities within small world play are limitless and practitioners who provide resources, encouragement and support for this type of play will be rewarded as they watch happy children learn and develop in a balanced, constructive and purposeful manner. The ultimate aim is to develop children's creativity and imagination, so that they may take these qualities with them throughout their lives and always make the most of the opportunities offered to them.



Offer different resources together, such as popular engines, other vehicles and traditional blocks, and support children as they use them creatively.

Safety note: Many small world toys are potential choking hazards and therefore unsuitable for under-threes. All children under five should be carefully supervised by responsible adults while playing with small pieces to ensure their safety.



Games become more complex as children develop their fine motor control, patience and imagination.

opportunities that this provides and are more able to use it as a form of expression. They may then gradually be encouraged to join in with their peers and create a more satisfying play that allows them to build and develop creative and imaginative skills.

Some children may find it difficult to play with small world characters if they have a visual impairment or a physical disability. In such case, practitioners must think creatively, considering the needs of each individual child. The need to find ways for them to be able to join in with games together with peers or to explore and manipulate pieces and design imaginative worlds either alone or with the help of adults. All children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) should be supported effectively in order to learn and fully benefit from small world play.

Children are very small players within the world, who often have to fall in with the plans and activities of others and always have to accept the guidance of those who are older.

When they set up small worlds of their own, they are immediately elevated to the roles of organiser, controller and decision maker and can experiment and make mistakes without fear of problems or repercussions.



Offering easily recognisable characters as small world play pieces inspires children to retell favourite stories.



Providing a particular type of construction kit alongside popular small world figures encourages children to take their characters to explore a new location.

The value of play involving popular stories and characters

Small children are attracted to the stories and characters that are specifically designed for them and marketed in books, television programmes, DVDs and other merchandise. They will have particular favourites that may be bought for them as presents by their families, to play with at home. There may also be popular characters, that appeal to most of the children, available in early years settings.

While settings will wish to avoid spending their budget on flimsy new toys based on current trends that will not last for many years, purchasing strong and well made character versions of some basic items will make small world play more appealing to some children who might otherwise be difficult to engage. Choosing the characters that retain their popularity for generations is as sound an investment as the purchase of blocks, balls, musical instruments and art and craft materials.

For example, the addition of some sturdy wooden versions of popular items or characters to a nursery's wooden train set will encourage many more children to re-create stories and real life scenarios using character

Animals and other living creatures

Toys, models and pieces available

A variety of small animal figures and play sets may be purchased from shops and educational suppliers. Some are detailed scale models, while others have more simple shapes or follow a particular style. A set of basic animals may be used in many different games and play sets may be mixed together and their pieces used as children wish, with pieces sometimes representing other creatures that they do not have.

It is also possible for children to create the creatures they would like to play with, especially with the guidance and support of adults playing alongside them. Play dough and modelling clay can be used to make models for a particular game and then reused in a different way after the game ends. More permanent pieces can be created using air drying clay or salt dough, which will harden and allow the small models to be painted.

Different stages of play for one to five year olds

Smooth and chunky wooden, plastic and rubber toys are suitable for one year olds. They will enjoy learning to identify the different animals and make their sounds. Say the name of each one frequently, while touching them or passing them to the children. Make the animals' sounds clearly and say their names again, while picking them up and putting them down in different places.

Move the animals around and pretend that they are communicating with each other. Ask the toddlers, *Where is the cow? What noise does she make? Can you show me the lion? What does he say? Who has the pig? Shall we put the ducks together on the pond and the horses in the field?*

More realistic and slightly less robust toys can be made available to two year olds, but they must be large enough and have no small, fragile or detachable parts. Encourage

these children to act out favourite stories with the figures and to begin to add ideas of their own. Adding a few play people will help with this. Make up stories and scenarios that the children will enjoy, so that they may start to copy your ideas and go on to develop them in their own ways.

Play ideas and creative games

- I'm making a bridge with the bricks. Now the troll is sitting under the bridge. Here are the three goats and they're hungry. They want to walk over the bridge to the meadow to eat the grass. But the troll won't let them walk on his bridge. He's going to jump up!

If older children need other pieces, such as trees, buildings, bridges or rivers, offer construction kits and art and craft and modelling resources, such as play dough, salt



One year olds can learn to identify different animals and combine them with other play pieces.

Woods and forests

Many different wild animals and creatures are found in the woods and forests of this country. Make a collection of these from the small world figures that you have, possibly including squirrels, hedgehogs, foxes, badgers, moles, rabbits, hares, dormice, owls, deer, wild boars, frogs, toads and grass snakes. Add play people to be rangers who care for the wood or National Park and its inhabitants, as well as families who come to explore.

Take the opportunity to talk about caring for the creatures and their environment by closing gates, walking quietly and not dropping litter, harming trees or picking flowers and plants.

Encourage the children to collect what they need for their games from their own outdoor area, such as sticks, leaves, grass, stones and rocks. If this is not possible, supply them with scraps of coloured fabrics and papers and modelling clay or play dough. Suggest that they make homes for different creatures, including holes, dens and nests. Provide small containers of water to be ponds and streams.

Encourage the children to remember the wild creatures that they have seen or heard about in stories and to create a small world in which they can have more adventures.

Play ideas and creative games

- Frogs try to entice toads and snakes into their pond, but the toads crawl under rocks to sleep and the snakes slither away into the grass to hide;
- Foxes, badgers and boars sniff around for food and follow trails with their noses until they find something to eat;
- Owls swoop around the sky looking for mice to catch, while the mice hide under rocks and in holes in trees;
- Deers are frightened when they hear noise and loud crashing sounds in the undergrowth and gallop off as a herd, but they stop running and are prepared to be friendly to humans when they slow down and walk very quietly to meet them, allowing themselves to be stroked;
- Rabbits, moles and worms dig tunnels and often suddenly meet each other underground when their tunnels merge and fall into each other, making them pop up in unexpected places... This can be a fun game to make players laugh and entice reluctant children to play more imaginatively!



Learning more about mini beasts can help children to take an interest in the tiny creatures that live in gardens and outdoor areas.