Constructive Play: What is it and how do I encourage it?

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[**https://famly.co/blog/management/encouraging-constructive-play/**](https://famly.co/blog/management/encouraging-constructive-play/)

Good news kids. It’s time to build something.

Constructive play (or construction play, if you prefer) is all about building, shaping, and manipulating things to create something new.

Even better, it’s a wonderful learning opportunity for children of every age. One of the most important, in fact.

That’s why we’ve put together this article. First, a plain-language guide to what constructive play is, where it comes from, and why it’s so key to children’s learning.

Later? You’ll find some hot tips on what you can do to improve constructive play in your setting and, well, who knows what else. Maybe lions? Let’s not wait around to find out.

**What is constructive play in the early years?**

Put simply, constructive play is when children use material to create or build something. It is organised and focused towards a goal.

The idea was formalised by the child development expert Jean Piaget, who worked extensively on understanding how children learn. Importantly, he believed that children learn by exploring the interaction between their ideas and the real world. Trying out those ideas is the key piece in the learning puzzle

According to our good friend Jean, children have already been through a stage of what’s called functional play before they’re ready to construct. This means they’ve felt materials, understood different sizes, had some experience of what prevents them falling and otherwise explored them with their various senses.

Now, these materials really can be anything. Solid or liquid (probably not gas). They could be sand, water, construction blocks, LEGO, play dough or wood.

The key is that the children are making something. Intentionally, and creatively. They are being curious and approaching that curiosity with hands-on inquiry. They are moving from a functional understanding to a clear idea of the properties of what they’re dealing with.

They are constructing.

##### **Why is constructive play so important then?**

Constructive play is so powerful because the learning opportunities it offers are almost beyond imagining. For example, children can explore:

* **Maths** – Exploring counting, shapes, sizes, symmetry and more.
* **Science** – Seeing cause and effect, gravity, and balance in action.
* **Understanding the World** – Exploring the attributes of materials and see how one object can represent another.
* **Creativity** – Taking an idea, and seeing it through in real life. Designing their own play and choosing different materials.
* **Imagination** – Small world play allows them to build characters and universes into their play.
* **Curiosity** – Exploring materials with inquiry and interest.
* **Language** – Teachers can scaffold with complex and intricate vocabulary.
* **Cooperation** – As children build together they learn how to work together.
* **Self-esteem** – Building confidence as they control their own environment.

Not too bad for a couple of building blocks eh? Perhaps most importantly, it is an open-ended and free play, where children get to relate their own ideas to the real world, just how Piaget wanted.

And a popular free play it is too. Studies suggest that when given various free play choices, [**children will choose constructive play more than 50% of the time**](https://pne6lmlbp01.storage.googleapis.com/MDQ3MTA5MDY1NA%3D%3D01.pdf).

Powerful stuff.

**9 tips to encourage constructive play**

So that’s all well and good, but what use is all this theory if you can’t do anything about it? What use is understanding the value in constructive play if your practitioners don’t have any clear-cut ideas to help them encourage it? That’s where this next section comes in…

**1. Getting the right stuff**

While it’s very impressive if you can get your children to build things out of thin air, if you’re going to get serious about constructive play you’re going to need some resources.

The trick here is to keep it as open-ended as possible. That means using resources that are not designed to be built in a specific way, but those that can be interpreted by the children and used in many different ways.

Just a few ideas you could include in your provision:

* Wood of different sizes and shapes
* Sticks and stones and other natural materials
* Water
* Sand and tools
* Car tires or wagon wheels
* Wooden building blocks
* Guttering and pipes
* Train Tracks
* [**LEGO or Duplo blocks**](https://famly.co/blog/inspiration/8-ways-to-use-lego-in-eyfs-development/)
* Cogs and wheels

Also be aware of developmental stages when you [**plan your continuous provision for constructive play**](https://famly.co/blog/management/improve-continuous-provision/). It might be that you could introduce a larger variety of unsual elements in older children’s play, for example, in order to help encourage Fantasy Play – the next stage in Piaget’s developmental journey.

##### **2. Valuable by itself**

While we’re talking about Piaget, it’s important to remember that constructive play is valuable all by itself. Some in early years see constructive play as a mere bridge towards fantasy play. This is because Piaget details these categories as a developmental process, with some taking this to mean we should be moving children towards this more advanced level of free play.

But as [**Dr Francis Wardle points out in this brilliant article**](http://www.communityplaythings.com/resources/articles/2015/constructive-play), constructive play is valuable all by itself, regardless of a child’s age or developmental stage.

This is because it comes very naturally to children, meaning it lets children just be children. Something we should encourage for as long as possible.

##### **3. Get down and boogie (or play instead)**

Struggling to get your youngest interested in constructive play? While you should never be forcing children into something they’re not ready for, you can spark an interest by modelling the play yourself.

As we found out in [**our interview with the team from The Curiosity Approach**](https://famly.co/blog/management/natural-environment-curiosity-approach-interview/), getting down on a child’s level is important for so many things. But not least, getting down and playing can help you to model play for children, and encourage your less confident learners to get involved.

**4. Try it…everywhere!**

Because constructive play is so key to a child’s development, it shouldn’t just be restricted to your inside provision. Children need to play with the relationship between their ideas and the real world in all sorts of different environments.

For example, taking constructive play outdoors provides a whole new range of challenges for children. Things like:

* How does the wind or the wet influence their structures?
* Does play dough go softer in the sun?
* Does overhead cover change any of this?
* How can they make larger structures that they can test their own balance on?
* Can I get really messy out here without worrying about ruining the nice new carpet we’ve laid inside?

##### **5. The link to fantasy**

So this section is all about how you can help to link constructive play to fantasy play.

But wait! Before you start calling us hypocrites by going against everything we said in number two, we don’t mean that you should push children past constructive play as soon as they’re ready.

Children from four and up will start to naturally mix fantasy play and constructive play together, and you can encourage this by adding more fantastical elements to your constructive play area, one at a time, over a longer period.

Whatever you do, the most important thing is that you don’t push children towards building something specific at the expense of fantasy play. Indulge their fantasies, and ask them about the swimming pool they’ve just built on top of their spaceship (that actually just looks like a pile of bricks to you).

Remember, they are testing their increasingly complex ideas out in the real world, and you should be the one to encourage this, not question it.

##### **6. Try some risky constructive play**

We’ve talked about the [**importance of risky play in the early years before**](https://famly.co/blog/management/risky-play-early-years/), as it helps children to learn about risks while experiencing some really important emotions.

So what better place to introduce some risk than in your constructive play? After all, what could be better construction than using real tools to build woodwork structures?

If you want to start off easy, consider buying some wood glue and helping children to glue together their creations (and teach them the important skill of patience along the way). Once you’re ready, start with some small, heavily supervised sessions using drills, saws and other more ‘grown-up’ tools.

##### **7. The bigger they are the harder they fall**

Like any good bird, pilot, or amateur trampolinist will tell you, what goes up, must indeed come down.

Unfortunately, it’s no different for your child’s creations. In fact, understanding the short-term nature of their creations is part of the learning experience with constructive play.

While some of their more permanent woodworking creations might be fully take-home-able, it’s unlikely that their tower blocks, sandcastles, or carefully constructed obstacle courses are going to last the night (or even the hour if Sammy from the Elephant Room has anything to say about it).

To begin with, this may be difficult for children to deal with, but it’s an important lesson to learn. You can take pictures for those children finding it most difficult, but it’s also about preparing children for the temporary nature of what they’re doing. After all, that’s half the fun!

##### **8. Scaffold and support with language**

Constructive play is a great vehicle for [**language development in the early years**](https://famly.co/blog/inspiration/10-simple-communication-and-language-activities/) through the meaningful interactions you can have with your hyper engaged children.

You can help to support their language by asking open-ended questions, and extending the language they’re using by adding extra vocabulary to their descriptions.

Another good idea is to try out signs in front of the constructive play area. You can have ‘long’, ‘medium’ and ‘short’, wooden blocks, different shapes and colours and so on.

##### **9. Mix it up**

Like any area of your continuous provision, it’s very important that you mix up your constructive play area regularly.

As children build worlds and expand their understanding, they might bring in things from other areas of the nursery. To find out what else you can add, simply ask them!

“What else would you like to add to your airport/jungle/exact replica of the planet Mars, Jane?”

Once you’ve got these ideas, start searching! Second-hand sellers, charity shops, and even the natural environment can provide plenty of inspiration for open-ended resources to add to your setting.

Happy constructing!