

Premier league

Playing football offers children so much more than just physical challenge, says *Michael Jones*

You may love football, you may hate it, but you have to admit that many children find it quite fascinating! As well as the obvious benefits for children's physical development, football and other sports have great potential for developing children's language and role play, while at the same time promoting social understanding and well-being.

LANGUAGE AND LEARNING

Every sport has its own vocabulary, and football has a lot of words and expressions that children love to use – referee, penalty, goal, red card, yellow card, offside (let's not go there!), corner, flag, half-time, goalie, foul, sent off, celebration. There are lots of opportunities for using action words, such as kick, score, dribble, throw, pass, fall down, get up, run, jump and head the ball.

Then there's the football kit, and talk about colours and recognising the team from its stripes and logos. By talking about the names of the players, and which club or country they play for, we are encouraging many aspects of learning, including knowledge of the local community and the wider world.

Children who are reluctant to become involved with books often love to look at football magazines, and will become deeply involved in sorting football cards by players, team colours and even countries.

ROLE PLAY

When we watch young children playing football, they are usually deeply involved in acting out what they have seen, either on TV, in the park or perhaps even at a real match.

Older children who use their jumpers as goalposts and have a kick-about are developing their physical skills, but what they are doing is pri-

'For many children football is a means by which they can express their identity'



Children at the Angel Community Nursery in London show the role-play value of playing football

marily role play. This role play, where children often act out extreme emotions and practise using the language of their sport, is just as valid as anything that happens in our designated role-play areas. Most of this play will happen spontaneously if children are given the chance and encouragement by practitioners.

CULTURAL IDENTITY

David Stevens, manager of the Angel Community Nursery in Westminster (part of the London Early Years Foundation), and colleagues actively promote football. 'For many children, it's a way of expressing their identity,' he says. 'It can come from a family tradition of supporting a local club, or develop spontaneously. It can grow into a very big interest, and a passion that will remain with them, and may even be passed on to their own children.'

'If a child wears a particular country's kit because it represents the family's heritage, then talking about the kit is a way to explore and celebrate the child's cultural identity. Family members often all support the same team, and even say, "We are a Chelsea family". By acknowledging

the child's interest in football, we are making a link with their family and their interests.'

When I visited the nursery on a fact-finding mission about children and football, many children were wearing their team's outfits, and parents proudly described to me why the family supports a particular team or country.

PLAYERS' BEHAVIOUR

But what about the behaviour of many professional players? Surely it's not good to watch players fighting, shoving and occasionally spitting and swearing on TV or even first-hand. Mr Stevens sees a lot of scope in football for exploring emotions. It's a great opportunity to talk about feelings, and whether it is right to hit someone because they tripped you up, or to start shouting because the referee has told you off.

'We can talk about winning, losing and sharing: passing the ball is sharing the ball. Children can recognise and talk about powerful emotions by looking at photographs of players in action, and from the expressions on their faces and their body language as



they celebrate winning, weep openly because they have either lost or won an important match, or howl in pain because their Achilles tendon has just snapped.'

Having a kick-about can be great fun, and it simply makes children feel good. And you have to admit it, if more men hugged each other, then the world would probably be a happier place too.

I asked Mr Stevens about some practitioners' concerns that being so accepting of football somehow sanctions the hostility that may later be expressed in intense inter-team rivalry.

'Very young children tend to focus on booting the ball and squabbling about who should have it,' he says. 'Our role is to encourage the fun aspect and passing and sharing. As children get older they become more aware of "their team", and we can channel this positively by talking about and celebrating everyone's teams.' ■

Michael Jones is a trainer and writer specialising in children's language development. For more information visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk

EQUIPMENT

Book choice



DOODLE BITES BY POLLY DUNBAR
Walker Books, paperback, £5.99
Little croc

Doodle bites Tumpty the elephant's bottom, so Tumpty stamps on Doodle's tail. They both start to cry, as do Hector pig and Tiptoe rabbit. It's time for plasters, apologies and kisses all round. Remind you of any recent incidents in the nursery?



TINY LITTLE FLY BY MICHAEL ROSEN AND KEVIN WALDRON
Walker Books, hardback, £11.99

Tiny Little Fly lands on the big guys – first Elephant, then Hippo and finally Tiger – but for all their tramping and squashing and swooping, they can't catch Tiny Little Fly. This is a simple tale told in rhyming text and with glorious illustrations and onomatopoeia that capture the animals' size – and their frustration.



RIBBIT RABBIT BY CANDACE RYAN AND MIKE LOWERY
Bloomsbury, paperback, £5.99

Frog and Bunny are the best of friends ('Ribbit, rabbit. Rabbit, ribbit'). They do everything together, like fighting monsters ('Ribbit, rabbit. Zip it, zap it'). And even though the two of them don't always get along ('Ribbit, rabbit. Trip it, trap it'), they always make up in the end. Alliteration, word play and a steady rhythm bring real energy to this story of a spat between friends.



GET WELL FRIENDS BY KES GRAY AND MARY MCQUILLAN
Hodder Children's Books, hardback, £10.99

Poorly animals seek out Nurse Nibbles to make them better. 'Dipak the dalmation is poorly. His spots came out in stripes' and 'Delia the dragon is poorly. She sneezed and set fire to her jumper.' This is a lovely book for role playing doctors and nurses, or children reluctant to take their medicine, administered with lots of humour.



OOMPH! BY COLIN MCNAUGHTON
Andersen Press, paperback, £5.99

The perfect summer read for young children is now out in a new edition. At the seaside Preston Pig bumps into Maxine, literally, bashing his nose but falling in love with her all the same. While they spend their time sunbathing, sailing, snorkelling and kissing Preston's nose better, a parallel tale unfolds through illustration. Mr Wolf is also on the beach, looking for sun, sea and sausages, and he's not having much luck.



BANANA SKIN CHAOS BY LILLI L'ARRONGE
Bloomsbury, paperback, £5.99

When a little boy throws his banana skin on the pavement, his sister warns him that it could cause an accident. He is amused rather than concerned, so, letting her imagination run wild, she describes with each new page how 'one thing can lead to another' until the whole town is in chaos. Of course, this could never happen – or could it? Children will enjoy tracking the events and their many consequences.

FURTHER READING

See our five-part series on physical development at www.nurseryworld.co.uk/go/physicaldevelopment. For more learning and development articles visit www.nurseryworld.co.uk