

We Skoolhouse

Progressive Approach: Anji Play





Anji Play-based Learning Curriculum

Anji Play is an innovative early childhood education approach originating from Anji County, Zhejiang Province, China. It was developed by educator Cheng Xueqin in the early 2000s, who was inspired by the idea that play is the foundation of learning. Her goal was to create an environment where children are free to engage in self-directed, uninterrupted play, which would foster creativity, problem-solving, and deeper engagement with the world around them.

This philosophy is rooted in the belief that children are naturally curious and capable of leading their own learning journeys when given the right materials, environment, and trust from adults. The framework emphasizes children's independence, the intrinsic value of play, and the importance of reflection and documentation.

Anji Play serves children primarily between the ages of 3 and 6, focusing on preschool and kindergarten levels. However, its philosophy and approach to learning can be adapted to suit younger and older children, as the emphasis on play is developmentally appropriate for all ages.

Philosophy of Anji Play

The core philosophy of Anji Play revolves around **five key principles: Love, Risk, Joy, Engagement, and Reflection.** These principles guide the structure of the curriculum and the interactions between educators, children, and the environment.



- **Love:** Recognizes the importance of adults trusting children's abilities and respecting their choices.



- **Risk:** Children are encouraged to take both physical and emotional risks, learning from trial and error.



- **Joy:** Play and learning should be joyful, encouraging children to immerse themselves fully in the experience.



- **Engagement:** The curriculum fosters deep, meaningful engagement through uninterrupted play.



- **Reflection:** Both teachers and children engage in daily reflection, documenting their experiences and learning from them.



Class Structures and Environment

Classrooms in Anji Play are designed with minimal intervention, featuring natural, open-ended materials like wooden blocks, tires, ropes, and other loose parts. The materials are deliberately chosen to be non-prescriptive, encouraging children to explore their creativity and invent their own ways of interacting with the items.

In terms of structure, the key elements of an Anji Play classroom are:

- **Uninterrupted Play Sessions:** Play is the core activity, and children are given extended periods of time (usually 90 minutes to 2 hours) for uninterrupted play. This allows them to engage deeply with materials and ideas without adult interference.
- **Outdoor Play:** Outdoor play is integral to the Anji Play approach. The outdoor environment is equipped with large, open spaces and challenging materials that encourage children to explore, climb, balance, and take physical risks.
- **Documentation:** A crucial component of Anji Play is the documentation process, which includes taking photos, videos, and written records of children's play. Children and educators review these materials together to reflect on the day's activities and learning experiences. This reflection helps children make sense of their play and draw connections between their actions and broader concepts.
- **Teacher's Role:** Teachers in an Anji Play classroom act as observers and documentarians. Rather than leading or directing, they support children by creating a rich environment and offering minimal guidance, stepping in only when necessary to ensure safety or facilitate reflection.

Research and Studies Supporting Anji Play

Anji Play has been the subject of various research studies that highlight its benefits. Some of the key findings include:

- **Cognitive Development:** A study by the China Development Research Foundation (CDRF) found that children in Anji Play environments demonstrated significant improvements in problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking skills compared to children in more traditional, teacher-led classrooms.
- **Social-Emotional Growth:** Research indicates that children in Anji Play settings develop strong social-emotional skills. They learn to negotiate, collaborate, and resolve conflicts through their play. A study published in *Early Child Development and Care* reported higher levels of emotional regulation and empathy in children who participated in child-directed play environments like Anji Play.
- **Gross Motor Skills:** Anji Play's emphasis on risk-taking and outdoor play promotes physical development. Research by the University of Zhejiang demonstrated that children in Anji Play schools exhibited better balance, coordination, and overall motor skills due to their regular engagement with challenging physical play.
- **Intrinsic Motivation:** According to a study conducted by Dr. Cheng Xueqin, children in Anji Play environments showed a higher degree of intrinsic motivation to explore, experiment, and persevere through challenges, as opposed to extrinsic motivators such as praise or rewards commonly found in traditional classrooms.



Benefits of Anji Play

The benefits of Anji Play extend beyond cognitive development, as the curriculum nurtures the whole child. Some key long-term outcomes include:

- **Increased Autonomy:** Children become more confident in making decisions and taking responsibility for their own learning.
- **Resilience:** By navigating risks and learning from mistakes, children build resilience and adaptability.
- **Collaborative Skills:** Through group play and reflection, children learn to work with others, communicate effectively, and develop empathy.
- **Lifelong Love of Learning:** The joy and freedom of play foster a love of learning, which can last throughout their educational journey and into adulthood.



Anji Play represents a revolutionary approach to early childhood education, emphasizing the power of self-directed play, risk-taking, and reflection. With proven benefits to cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development, it offers a compelling model that could influence early childhood education worldwide. In an age where structured learning is often prioritized, Anji Play, along with other progressive models, reminds us of the vital role that play holds in nurturing independent, capable, and joyful learners. As more studies continue to validate this approach, its adoption beyond China could bring a transformative shift in how we view childhood education.



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