



Brief

The selection and availability of play materials in the physical indoor ECEC environment and children's play opportunities

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Play is essential in children's lives, and children's right to play is a human right stated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 31 (UNCRC, 1989). In Norway, 93.4% of all children between the ages of one and five attend early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Statistics Norway, 2022). When children attend ECEC, it is the responsibility of the ECEC to facilitate play and activities so children can experience joy and engagement—alone and with peers (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). The *Framework Plan for Kindergartens* regulates the content and tasks in the Norwegian ECEC. Concerning play materials, it provides the following regulations: “staff shall design the physical environment so that all children are given the opportunity to actively participate in play and other activities and so that toys and equipment are accessible to the children” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017, p. 19). However, findings from the research project Better Provision for Norway's children (BePro) demonstrated some challenges concerning quality in children's potential activities in the indoor physical environment. Findings showed that many children were offered a sparsely furnished indoor environment, with little variation in play materials.

This study was initiated to gain a deeper insight into the selection and availability of play materials in the indoor environment of Norwegian ECEC and examine how this influences

children's play opportunities. The empirical material consists of qualitative observational data from eight ECEC centers, where one group of children in each center is in focus. Results show differences in practice between the groups of children. While some groups facilitate a diverse selection of play materials and provide well-equipped play zones, other groups have empty shelves or a restricted practice that limits children's own choices and play opportunities. Discussions concern how available and flexible loose materials that can be moved around and combined in various ways appear to encourage children's co-determination in play, development of dramatic play, and inclusion in play. Given the theory of affordances, the results indicate how children's access to play materials affects their play opportunities, where inaccessible materials can limit children's play, and available play materials can stimulate play. Children have the right to play, and child groups where the children are free to play and explore with versatile and varied materials seem to provide suitable conditions for children's play and thus children's learning and development. Working to facilitate the physical indoor environment for play may contribute to quality development in ECEC.

Keywords: *affordances; physical indoor environment; play materials; pedagogical practice; quality*

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