The Conscious Play® approach from The Opentree Foundation helps children develop emotional awareness, resilience, and positive relationships through mindful, purposeful play.

Children play a game of "Guess Who," asking questions, making predictions, describing pictures, breaking gender-biases, and uniting them in learning through play.

Lessons From the Ground

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Transforming Classrooms Through Conscious Play®

As the purpose of education becomes future readiness, how do our classrooms need to transform? Academic rigor and "structured" learning leave very little space for independent critical thinking, creativity, inquiry, and joy in the classroom. As we move from "what children know" to "what children can do," one thing is clear: we cannot afford to overlook play as an essential learning tool anymore.

The Opentree Foundation (TOF), a non-profit organization based in Maharashtra, India, has been championing play-integrated learning for over 20 years. Through its flagship initiative Toybank - Development through Play, and its scalable Conscious Play® approach, TOF impacts 200,000 children annually in under-resourced schools, providing them with the life skills they need to grow up in a world that is increasingly uncertain and complex.

A Sample Play Session

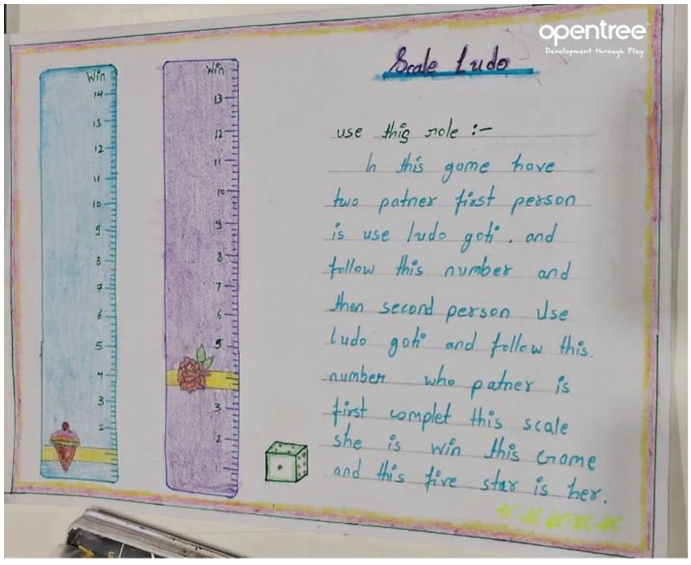
In a low-income community school in rural Maharashtra, India, children sit in a classroom with chipped walls and desks crammed into one another. Pooja,* TOF's trained Play Worker is here to facilitate a play session. She divides the class into groups using animal sounds, a simple activity that transforms the classroom in seconds — students are meowing, trumpeting, hopping, and roaring to find their play partners for the day. There is a palpable sense of curiosity and impatience as students settle into their groups, and wait for Pooja to hand out the games. As the children play, the classroom comes alive with questions, ideas, and conversations.

Today, each group's task is to develop their own game, based on any of the games they have played before. Amid the spirited discussions, Pooja moves from one group to the next, listening to ideas for their games and the rules. Every now and then, she will pause at a group, offering input in the form of inquiry: *"What might happen if.... I'm wondering, what if this was...."* There is no attempt to "correct" or "teach." When, occasionally, a group experiences conflict, Pooja's immediate response is to nudge them toward collaborative problem-solving and empathy.

After the session, the Play Worker has a quick chat with the class teacher, telling her which games were played and what she observed with the children. She shares examples of behaviors, the ideas children developed, the skills they showed in class, and recommendations about how the teacher can use the games in her lessons as well.

Our Conscious Play® Approach: Transforming How Children Learn to Learn

Children's capacity for growth and self-expression is not limited by resources, but by opportunities. Pooja is one of the many trained Play Workers who use our Conscious Play® approach developed over a decade ago. After observing thousands of children in different



L: Students reimagine a game of Ludo played on a scale instead of a board.
R: A TOF play worker guides a game of Catch N' Count, which builds numeracy and decision-making skills.

settings, one powerful idea has echoed loud and clear: Children learn best through play.

At TOF, this idea is the cornerstone of our Life Skills Play programs. The Conscious Play® model is designed to be resource-sensitive and replicable, especially for underserved contexts. This is not a parallel system, it is a plug-in model that enhances what's already there.

Through active collaboration with district education departments, we create scalable models within public education systems, embedding play into the existing school day. We use curated play materials and experiences that are open-ended, age-appropriate, and provide avenues for independent thinking, creativity, collaboration. Our facilitators and teachers are trained to not meddle with children's problem-solving, but rather to nurture it.

The key is in seeing the transformative potential for play. Even simple board games can be facilitated to build skills and behaviors. Monopoly becomes a reflection on the impact of making informed choices, negotiation, and thinking logically. Puzzles become team relays and timed challenges that build not only visual and spatial skills, but also empathy and collaboration. Blocks? Endless possibilities for meaningful conversations.

What Makes Play Transformative?

Play works wonders for the human brain and the learning experience. It sparks an iterative, stimulating state of mind, drawing children into a safe space where they think freely, express themselves authentically, and are keen to try new ideas without the fear of failing.

Neuroscience shows that play activates and strengthens neural pathways — boosting brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which supports learning, memory, and emotional resilience.[1] In fact, within just 30 minutes of play, over a third of the genes in the brain's cortex show altered activity, enhancing neuroplasticity and preparing the brain for complex thinking. This makes play not just joyful, but neurologically essential.

Unfortunately, play is often dismissed as recreational or frivolous in India's rigid formal education landscape, where overburdened classrooms, exam-centric instruction, and high student-teacher ratios dominate. Although play-based interventions can solve critical issues, it is kept out of classrooms and learning experiences entirely — and that's what we address through our work.

Snakes & Ladders: How does a child respond to less-than-ideal situations? How does she choose to express her emotions? What is her response — give up or try again?

Why Our Conscious Play® Approach Matters

For children from underserved communities, learning through play could mean preventing them from losing interest in school because they do not feel safe, seen, or heard. It could mean ensuring they grow up with the agency and confidence to make positive life choices that break intergenerational cycles. Consider the story of Yogesh, who found a love for mechanical games while attending our play sessions in a home for destitute children. A decade later, he has turned this love into his livelihood as an automobile technician. For millions of children like him, play offers safe spaces, possibilities, hope, and a way to reclaim their life trajectories.

Across over 700 such under-served schools — ranging from remote villages to urban communities in Mumbai — our play sessions become pockets of transformation. Children who were once disengaged or disruptive often emerge as leaders and collaborators. In one school, a boy labeled as "restless" began facilitating group games with remarkable clarity. In another, a girl who had never spoken in class began narrating play rules with confidence and wit. These are not isolated incidents, they are repeated patterns across contexts, reinforcing one truth: Play meets children where they are, and reveals who they can become.

Our Conscious Play® approach is as much about observing play as using it. Play allows children to show

A Play Worker engages in a game of "Fish in a Pond," which builds listening skills, focus, and teamwork.

us who they are and what they're capable of — if only we take the time to observe. Every single reaction, behavior, and response that a child demonstrates during play is not an isolated event — it is an indicator of future-readiness, and we must pay careful attention to this.

Measuring What Matters: India's First Play-Based Life Skills Assessment

This calls for a fundamental shift in the teacher's role — from instructor to observer and facilitator. To make these outcomes visible and actionable, TOF developed India's first Play-Based Life Skills Assessment Framework in 2023–24, years after implementing our Conscious Play® approach on field.

The framework aims to observe children's life skills in their most natural, yet most present state — that of play. It allows educators and facilitators to engage in conversations with children, observe their responses without taking away from the joy, openness, and freedom of play.

Over the last two years, we've used this framework to assess how our Life Skills Play programs impact children, and the results are more than encouraging:

- Over 50% improvement in critical thinking and communication skills among 6- to 14-year-olds
- Children from vastly different school contexts (under-resourced vs. well-equipped) reached near-identical skill levels post-intervention, suggesting that play acts as an equalizer.

But the most promising shift is that over 44% of teachers reported children's life skills improved not just during play, but also extended to the classroom. Play-based learning builds skills and knowledge for life. Imagine how much students would thrive if such play experiences were part of everyday teaching learning?

Reimagine Your Classroom Activities

- Could a math concept be explored through a strategy board game or a number-based puzzle?
- Could you use loose parts and building blocks for problem-solving challenges?
- Could pretend play with classroom objects help students understand emotions or social situations?
- What if students designed their own games to reflect what they've learned — setting rules, testing ideas, and iterating together?

Ask yourself:

- Where can I create opportunities for student-led learning?
- How can I observe more, direct less?
- What moments of joy can I make space for in my teaching?

Learning through play builds engagement and curiosity, integral to improved learning outcomes.

Begin by noticing where your students are most engaged, where they take the lead, and where joy sneaks in. Over the years, that's what the Conscious Play® approach has taught us to do — put children at the center of learning to create experiences that spark curiosity, inquiry, and iteration and reveal new possibilities for teaching, for the school culture, and for learning itself.

As we look ahead, we envision a world where teachers and students are empowered through play; for this, mainstreaming play pedagogy is no longer optional. The right to play must become a reality, for every child, in every classroom, in order to build a generation of resilient, well-rounded, rational adults.

Frederick Douglass said, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken [adults]." These words are the very ethos of our work at TOF. Through play, we want to transform both the childhood and adulthood of each child we work with, and we shall not stop until we have achieved this in the years to come.

Note:

[1] https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-serious-need-for-play/

Disclosure Statement:
The author is Co-founder and CEO of Opentree Foundation.

Benetech Launches Groundbreaking AI Initiative to Revolutionize STEM Education for Neurodivergent and Visually Impaired Students

In the United States, one in five students are dyslexic or have a learning difference. Another 2.5 million have visual impairments or physical disabilities that make interacting with STEM educational content challenging. To address this disparity, Benetech, a global nonprofit advancing equitable opportunities for all learners, is announcing the launch of an initiative to transform STEM education.

With philanthropic partners General Motors, the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation, Cisco, the Esther and Pedro Rosenblatt Foundation, and the Peninsula Endowment, Benetech is developing a breakthrough AI-powered platform that transforms teaching materials, especially STEM, into interactive, accessible content. Students with dyslexia or visual impairments will be able to read, listen, and ask questions about challenging concepts like equations and images, empowering them to learn independently through Benetech's accessibility-first learning tools.

"Over 30% of neurodivergent or visually impaired students aspire to STEM careers, yet fewer than 10% achieve employment in STEM fields-a stark reminder of the persistent inaccessibility of STEM education," said Ayan Kishore, CEO of Benetech. "By harnessing the power of AI, we are transforming complex STEM materials into accessible formats, breaking down barriers, ensuring STEM education and careers are within reach for all."

Development of this groundbreaking system includes phases of integration, testing, and pilot programs for neurodivergent students. This strategic approach ensures that the final product will be effective and user-friendly, setting a new standard in accessible education technology.

"In an age where AI is shaping the future of learning, equity must be our guiding principle," said Vilas Dhar, President of the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation. "Every student deserves access to educational materials that meet their needs, yet for too long, learners with disabilities have been left out-not because of technical challenges but because of a lack of inclusivity-oriented design. Benetech's innovative approach changes that by using AI to refine STEM materials into accessible formats, leveling the playing field for all students. This work reminds us that creating values-based educational interventions can be a powerful catalyst for a more knowledgeable and informed society."