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Open Minds Open Doors

A newsletter about the power of open-ended play as a pathway to inclusion



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AND EXPERT DR
ESTHER JOOSA
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Open Minds Open Doors

Updates about the OMOD program

Happy New Year and welcome to the third issue of Open Minds Open Doors Newsletter. In this issue, Dr Esther Joosa takes some time to investigate the value of block play.

We also feature the role and commitment of volunteer playmakers from NIEC. Their dedication to be part of the children's play experiences are an immense contribution to see the continuation of the participating children's play experiences.

For the coming year, we have planned again a series of play sessions, parent information workshops and Dr Esther is ever read to answer your questions on the role of play in development.

Charlotte Goh
Executive Director Playeum

The Power of Block Play

In OMOD blocks are a critical ingredient. One of my favourite type of blocks, are large Jenga blocks. Documenting and observing children's engagement with these blocks shows the many affordances and how they support key 21st-century capacities such as communication, creativity, problem solving and collaboration.

As children build, balance, and rebuild, they develop spatial awareness. They learn how parts relate in space, how structures hold, and how small changes affect stability. Block play invites problem-solving, planning, and flexible thinking rather than fixed outcomes. Socially, blocks create shared focus. Children negotiate ideas, explain intentions, and adapt to others' contributions. The materials are neutral yet expressive, allowing collaboration without heavy language demands. Through block play, thinking becomes visible, ideas are tested in real time, and learning emerges through doing together rather than instruction.

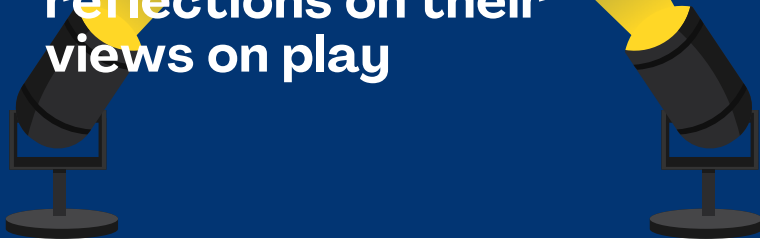
Play as a Pathway to an Inclusive World

For parents who want to learn more about block play and other types of play

The focus of OMOD on block play as a critical ingredient in a child's development is founded on the powerful role that space and building plays in development of 21st century skills, social engagement and empowerment of children. Block play does not come in a ready made manual, but is part of a process of a child's discovery of its transformative potential in space.

Dr Esther's role as co-creator is based on 35 years of personal and professional experiences in working with families, disabilities and developing open-ended play and creative art practices. During OMOD she provides regular sharings, ideas and insights of how simple, everyday materials and other resources, can richly support every child's development.

Meet our playmaker volunteer team and the effect of regular reflections on their views on play



Each session, we have a group of volunteers from NIEC, the National Training Institute by MOE for Singapore's Early Childhood Educators present. Cindy, Dorothy, Marie and Sanjivan took the opportunity to learn more about play and diversity in development in practice. Often struggling with assignments for their study, or with family commitments, they dedicate their time to support the programme execution and ensure meaningful and safe play and interactions.

How much their dedication means is shown in their regular attendance and time they dedicate. They normally come in one hour early around 1 p.m. to prepare. As they set up the space and session play materials, I often discuss the power of everyday materials, such as playing with boxes or with shadows.

Beyond these duties, the volunteers spend a full three hours with the children to practice child-centered facilitation skills and ensure documentation of children's progress. Each session after they help to clean up, they stay behind to reflect on the values of play.

It is in the reflection sessions that we all share the strengths of children and the commitment of families. The sessions also give voice of how much OMOD means and the power of building communities through play. As new teachers they learn the strengths of creating inclusive pathways through play for the children and their parents.



In the OMOD programme we are grateful for the volunteers from NIEC, who dedicate each session at least five hours of their free time to bring continuation to the children's play experiences.



Listening to John: Giving a Voice to Children with Diverse Development

By Dr Esther Joosa

Open Minds Open Doors started with the core vision: To Create Pathways through Play to an Inclusive World. Now in its seventh year, we are strengthening our outreach through family play education and guidance, and through giving voice to our participants.

John (9) has been part of the play programme since September 2024, making it more than a year of regular participation. John is vocal, and his disability is not clearly visible. In fact, John is well-spoken, and likes to engage in adult conversations with me. His favourite topics are about research, my work in programme design and his role in leadership.

When asked what he enjoys most, he speaks immediately about materials. Initially, when he came he enjoyed playing with old I-Phone boxes. During that time he shared that it was hard for him to have friends, as other children did not understand his interests.

Currently, he likes the dominoes and Jenga, blocks describing them as wooden structures that allow him to build, test, and rebuild ideas. He also values outdoor play and mentions the playground at Dempsey, where playing outside feels different from being indoors.

John is clear that the programme could be better. He finds some parts boring and believes play needs more “real” materials.

He makes a distinction between pretend tools and authentic ones, suggesting that real materials create excitement and meaning, especially for older children. He proposes a system where real clay and tools are available for those aged seven and above, while still keeping safer options for younger children.

For John, real play is authentic. It involves real clay that can be hardened using heat, not just shaped and discarded. He believes clay helps children think, experiment, and understand how things change. When asked to imagine a world without play, John is blunt. Without play, there is no invention, no creativity, and no future for humans.

John further speaks about his ideas of a future project that brings people together through art, without labels. He reminds us that not all disabilities are visible and that camouflage is often used to avoid judgement. His reflection ends simply: kindness should not depend on difference. Trying to understand each other already matters.

His advice to children in Singapore is simple and serious. Academics matter, but diversity, mental health matters too. Without play, he believes, humanity loses its way.



Play Dates January/February 2026

- 10 January OMOD Common Ground ,Bedok
- 24 January OMOD play Kids Space, Dempsey
- 28 February OMOD, Common Ground, Bedok

For enquiry, omod@playeum.com