Promoting elderly inclusion through an intergenerational play framework

The context of the project

The context

◊ The ageing of population and the inclusion of older people is a growing concern in the EU.

◊ Intergenerational programs provide contact and communication between younger and older people. This social interaction alleviates elderly loneliness and improves their well-being and mental health.

Intergenerational play to promote elderly inclusion

◊ Play occurs at all ages of life, it is a natural bridge between generations.

◊ Play in itself is a source of pleasure and sharing. It is a fundamental need that helps to create connection between young people and elderly.

◊ On a second level, plays allows the elderly to exercise their memory and to maintain their motor skills and intellectual capacity.

◊ Intergenerational play also improves the positive perception of each group of age vis-à-vis the other one.

PEARL - **P**laying to **E**ngage **A**ctive **R**elationships for **L**ifelong connection

Inter-generational play

1 Social connections

- Alleviating loneliness and enhancing well-being of older people
- Breaking intergenerational barriers and promoting social cohesion
- Moments of exchange and listening
- Increasing self-esteem and usefulness feeling of older people

2 Cognitive skills

- Stimulating memory
- Improving concentration
- Preventing cognitive decline
- Supporting creativity and imagination

3 Motor skills

- Maintaining motor performance and coordination
- Supporting fine motor skills
- Preventing sedentarism

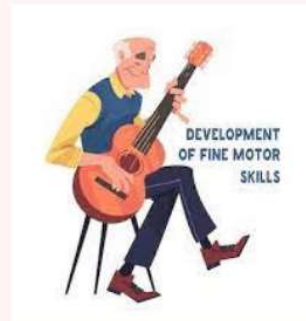### 4 Benefits for younger people

- Promoting self-regulation and empathy
- Fostering learning ability and skill development
- Intergenerational knowledge transfer
- Reducing age-related stereotypes

DEVELOPMENT OF FINE MOTOR SKILLS

The Erasmus+ project

Objective

Design an **efficient play framework** to foster **intergenerational relationships** and to support **cognitive and motor skills of elderly**.

Operational framework

Draw on the experiences of the partners to implement and to evaluate the results of a **9-month pilot program on intergenerational play**.

Output

The results of the pilot sessions will be used to deliver a **resource package** and a **training program** that will primarily benefit to **professionals working in intergenerational programs** aimed at **fostering active ageing**.

The resource package will comprise two products: (i) a practical manual to analyse the specific context of intergenerational play and, accordingly, to set up play spaces and select games in a consistent and sustained way; and (ii) a catalog listing the relevant games to be used with a classification and analysis of their characteristics and required skills.

The resource package will be used as a basis for conducting the training program both at the national and EU levels.

Project management timeline

Define the project's workflow and structure	Implementation of the pilot sessions	Design of the intergenerational play framework (practical guide + catalog of games)	Training program and broadcasting of the results
Sept. to December 2025	January to Sept. 2026	October to December 2026	January to May 2027

The partners: Ludoland

Our project

◊ Promoting play practices

◊ Highlighting the socio-educational and cultural aspects of play

◊ Encouraging free play among practicioners

◊ Creating a toy library in Luxembourg

Our audience

◊ All audiences, from early childhood to the elderly

Our activities

◊ Organising play events

◊ Lending toys and games

◊ Developing educational projects centered on play

The partners: Instituto de Apoio à Criança (IAC)

Our project

◊ Experience in delivering training on the use of play in a professional context

◊ IAC will add to the play framework the matters about evaluation and user experience

◊ Design, communication and translation of the project's documentation

Our audience

◊ All audiences, focusing on children (0-18 years) and professionals from health, education and social areas

Our activities

◊ Along the years IAC have been committed to promote the implementation of toy libraires in the communities from north to south of Portugal, giving technical support and training, namely through the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects around play activity, alongside with pilot direct intervention projects

The pilot sessions

Intergenerational groups for the play sessions

◊ APEMH Haus Amitié / Primary school Mondorf

◊ Club Kordall Aktiv / Primary school Differdange centre

◊ Résidence An de Wisen / Maison de jeunes de Bettembourg

◊ Servior Differdange / Foyer de jour Am Stram Gram

Frequency of the play sessions

◊ 4 to 5 sessions per group

◊ 2-hour length

◊ Once a month

Role of the partners

◊ Ludoland will implement the play sessions in Luxembourg

◊ IAC will evaluate the functioning of the play sessions and the user experience (surveys translated in Luxembourgish and French where needed)

The dissemination of the results

The resource package

◊ Publication in different languages (EN, FR, PT, DE)

◊ Channels of communication: Gero newsletter, partners' websites, social networks, Erasmus+ Projects Results Platform, European group of Toy Libraries (ETL)

Training sessions

◊ Gero – Kompetenzzenter fir den Alter (Luxembourg)

◊ IAC – Humanization and Right to Play partners (Portugal)

◊ EPALE and ETL (Other European countries)

Workshops

◊ In Luxembourg, a workshop on intergenerational play will be organised in partnership with the city of Differdange

◊ In Portugal, a workshop will be delivered to toy librarians and education and social professionals from different partners (e.g. toy libraries, schools, retirement homes)

The play framework

Play is defined by five characteristics (*Caillois, Huizinga*). Play is:

◊ **Free** - People engage into play on a voluntary basis, they are free to chose the games they wqnt to play, who they want to play with, and how they want to play those games.

◊ **Intrisically motivated** - People play for the enjoyment of the play activity in itself. Play is not motivated by the pursuit of a profit or a specific goal (e.g. cognitive, motor or emotional skills).

◊ **Fictional** - Play is a second-degree activity which has no consequences on real life. Play is a space where anything is possible, where you can experiment and where failure is not punished.

◊ **Uncertain** - Unlike a a book or a theatrical work, we don't know how play will unfold, when or how it will end.

◊ **Ruled** - For play to exist, there must be binding rules. Even with pretend play, players establish their own rules. These rules are only valid if they are accepted by all the players.
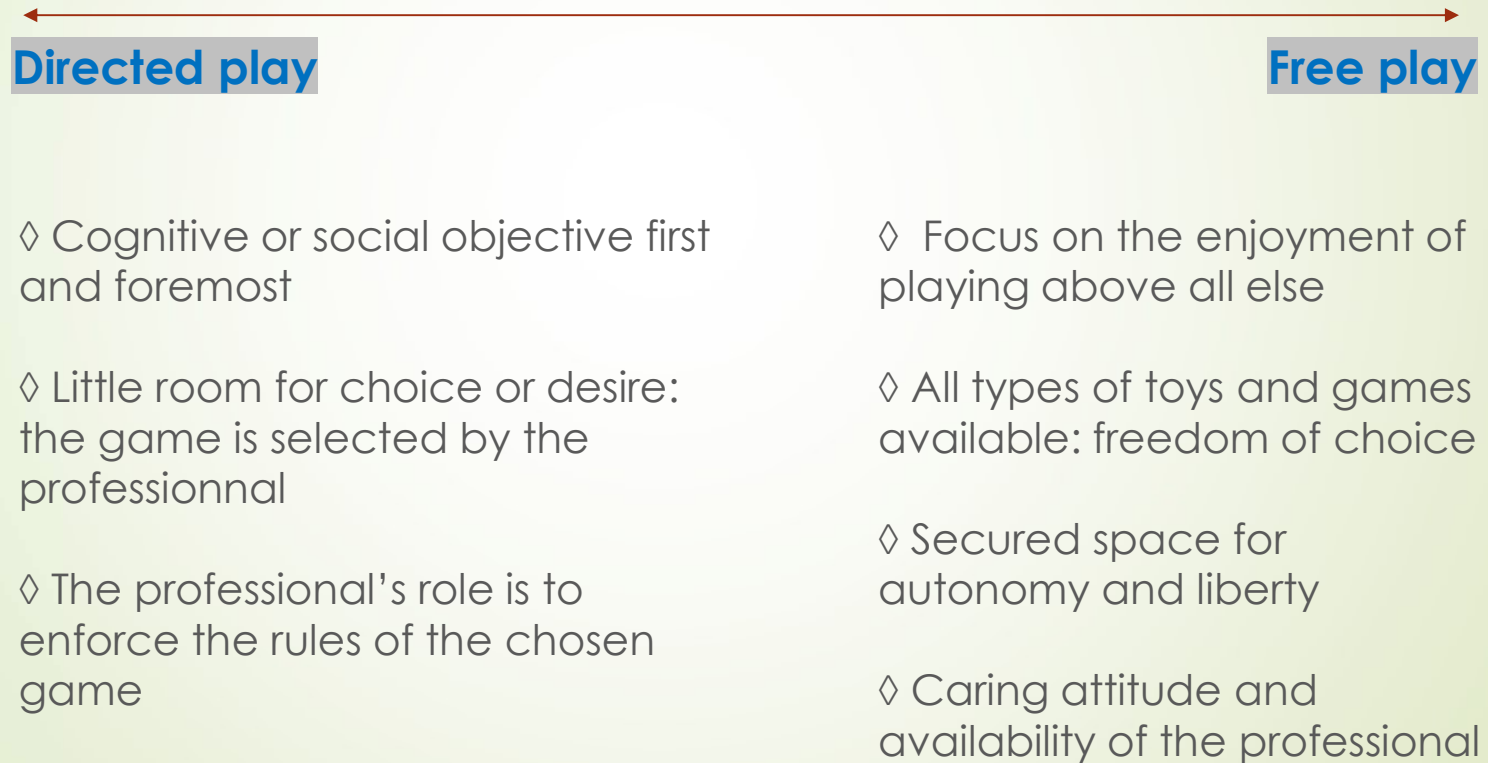
The play framework

Play has to be centred on the needs, interests and skills of participants. **Our primary objective is to make people play and have fun during the sessions**. In the context of this project, we also grant importance to foster intergenerationnal relationships during the play activity.

We start from a situation of natural play to reach wider objectives on a cognitive, social, motor, affective… level.
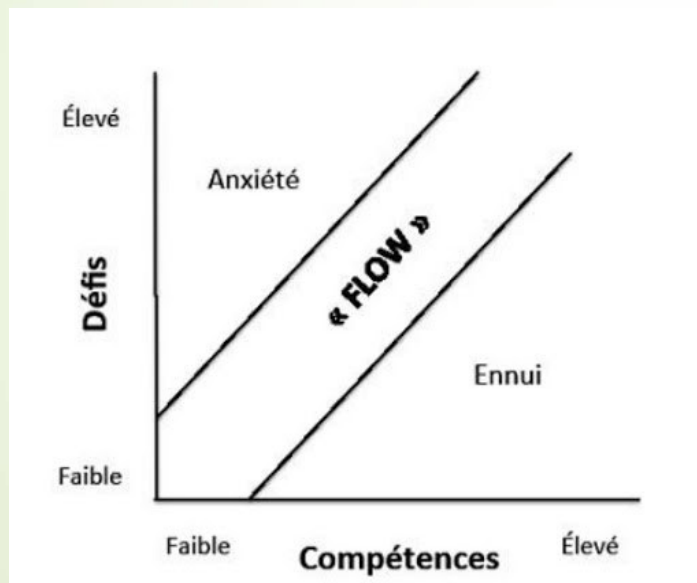
This approach differs from that of professionals that want to reach a predefined objective using play as a media (among others) to reach this objective.

The play framework

Directed play ←———————————————————→ **Free play**

◊ Cognitive or social objective first and foremost

◊ Little room for choice or desire: the game is selected by the professionnal

◊ The professional's role is to enforce the rules of the chosen game

◊ Focus on the enjoyment of playing above all else

◊ All types of toys and games available: freedom of choice

◊ Secured space for autonomy and liberty

◊ Caring attitude and availability of the professional

The play framework

The play experience creates the conditions for optimal experience (flow) as defined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (1990).

◊ Play provides an immediate pleasure

◊ Players are focused, deeply engaged and free from distractions

◊ The goal is clear

◊ Players have control over their actions

◊ Self-consciousness disappears, but paradoxically, the sense of self is strengthened

◊ The perception of time is altered

The play framework

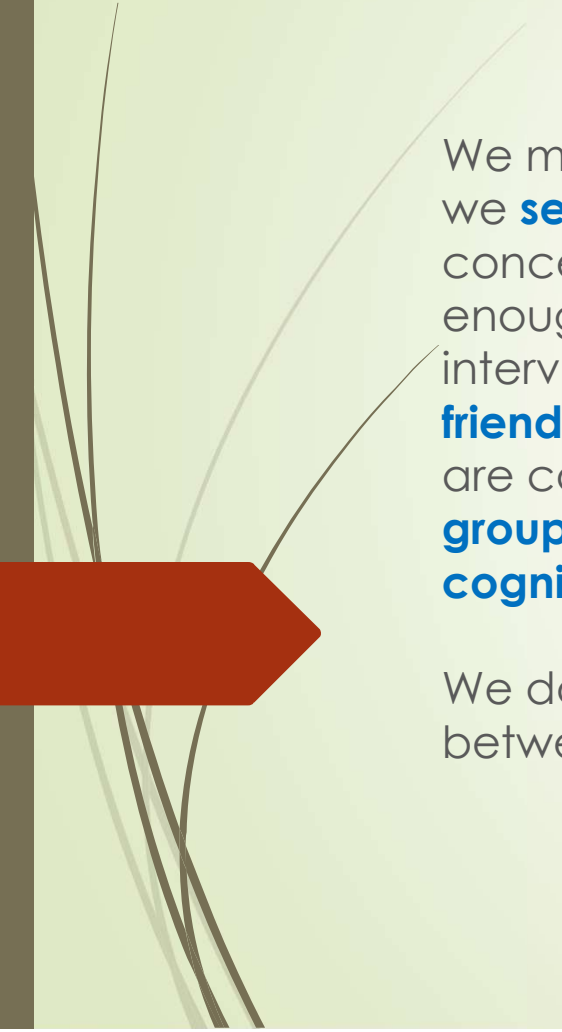A play framework is designed along different dimensions (*Perino*):

◊ The organization of the play space,
◊ The selection of toys/games,
◊ the functioning rules of the play sessions, and
◊ the behaviour of professionals.

Iterative design of the intergenerational play framework along these four dimensions: Trial, reflexion, revision…

The play framework

We mostly use **free play** as a way of functioning. In this specific context, we **select toys and games in relation with the desires and abilities of the** concerned **public**, and make sure that the selected games provide enough interaction between the two groups of age. As **professionals**, our interventions consist in **explaining the rules** of the games and **providing a friendly and entertaining environment to participants**. The play sessions are conceptualized to **foster** as much as possible **interaction between groups of ages** and autonomy among participants, **as well as** to foster **cognitive and motor skills of older people**.

We do not exclude to use directed play or to organize tournaments between intergenerational teams.

The ESAR system

We use the ESAR system to **organise play spaces** and to select a **wide diversity of toys and games** within these broad categories.

◊ **Exercise**: Sensory and motor exercise play repeated for the pleasure of effects and immediate results.

Examples: wooden marble run, weight balance, parachute game…

◊ **Symbolic**: Play to pretend, imitate objects and peoples, play roles, create scenarios, represent reality through images or symbols.

Examples: costumes, vintage tea shop, wooden circuit train, farm animals figurines…

The ESAR system

◊ **Assembly** (or construction): Play to gather, combine, arrange and fit more elements to form a whole, and achieve a specific goal.

Examples: endless puzzle, supermagformers, kapla…

◊ **Rules:** Games with a specific code, and rules, accepted by the players, to comply to.

Examples: association games (compatibility), circuit game (ludo), skill games (traditional wooden games and balance games), strategy games (nine men's morris), language games (speech), mathematic games (shut the box)...

The ESAR system

The ESAR system provides a framework for analysing the **skill content of toys and games**.

This first classification into four types of play (facet A) is followed by a psychological analysis which facilitates the description of intellectual or **cognitive** (facet B), functional and **motor** (facet C), **social** (facet D), **linguistic** (facet E) **and affective abilities** (facet F).

These six facets allow a complete analytical look on play, games or play materials in the perspective of both active ageing and children's development.

https://systeme-esar.org

The organisation of play spaces

◊ Play spaces are organized according to the four ESAR categories: **Exercise -** sensori-motor and experimentation, **Symbolic** - Imitation and role playing games, **Assembly** - 2D and 3D construction games, **Rules** - Oversized wooden games and board games.

◊ Play spaces are **clearly marked** and **well ventilated**. They are also organized properly and consistently.

◊ Play spaces remain the **same from one session to the next**, to help participants familiarise themselves with them. This stability fosters emotional security, providing an environment that is conducive to free play and concentration.

◊ The **proportion of games** used **in each category depends on the group**. For example, with a group of teenagers and seniors aged around 65-70, wooden games, board games and assembly games should be mostly used. With a group of children and seniors with diminished cognitive and motor skills, the proportion between the different categories should be more balanced.

The selection of games

◊ To **ensure a diverse range of choices** for the participants, select a wide variety of games from the different **ESAR (sub)categories**. Some people prefer to play with or without rules. Some people feel more comfortable with skilled games, while others prefer strategy games…

◊ To guarantee clarity in the play proposal and foster concentration, strike a balance between offering enough games to provide diversity and freedom of choice, while avoiding providing too many games, which can lead to confusion and information overload.

◊ To make sure participants enjoy the play activity, select games that are **adapted to** their **skills and desires**, allowing them to live an **optimal experience** (*Csikszentmihalyi*). The games should be challenging enough to avoid boredom, but not so complicated as to cause anxiety.

◊ In an intergenerational context, select games that **encourage connections and** foster **interactions between the two groups of age**.

The role of professionals

The **professional's objective** is to **make people play**, i.e. to draw the audience into a play situation and maintain their engagement for as long as possible.

◊ **Before the sessions**, the professional's choices regarding the organisation of the play spaces and the selection of games are essential.

◊ **During the sessions**, the professional must be observant, available and flexible:

- explain the rules of the games;

- provide entertainment to stimulate the play attitude (if needed);

- renew and modify assembly and board games (if necessary);

- reorganise play spaces after their use to preserve their consistency and attractiveness.

◊ **After the sessions**, it is important to debrief on the efficiency of the play spaces and games selected in order to improve the functioning of the play framework across the sessions. Which games interested participants? Were they suited to their abilities? Did they encourage enough interaction between the two age groups?

The evaluation of the pilot sessions

The Instituto de Apoio à Criança (IAC) will make the play framework evaluation which will occurs as follows:

◊ **Before the sessions**
   - Diagnostic evaluation to understand participants' expectations and needs, which would help enrich the pilot sessions (online platform for participants to provide feedback).

◊ **During the sessions**
   - The evaluation of user experience will be carried out through surveys covering topics such as perceived benefits from the experience of the pilot sessions (e.g. social, physical and psychological benefits), satisfaction with the activities that were carried out, ideas for improving the sessions, participants' involvement in the activities and interaction with the materials

◊ **Final session**
   - IAC will attend one of the last pilot sessions to gather qualitative data (e.g. interviews and focus groups) and evaluate the project's materials

Thanks for your attention