

Why This Works

How play, puzzles and practical contexts rebuild Maths & English confidence

A curriculum design insight inspired by the Great Elf Game

This is not about Christmas

At first glance, activities like the Great Elf Game can look seasonal or playful.

In reality, they are carefully structured learning experiences that surface core Maths and English skills — repeatedly, meaningfully and with reduced anxiety.

What matters is not the theme. It is the **conditions for learning** that the design creates.

What learners are actually doing

When learners take part in structured games and puzzles like this, they are not “opting out” of rigour. They are engaging with it, often more consistently than in traditional delivery.

In this game learners are:

- calculating totals repeatedly (fluency through repetition)
- tracking running figures over time (accuracy and number sense)
- weighing up risk and probability when making decisions
- interpreting instructions, conditions and constraints (functional literacy)
- explaining and justifying choices to others (spoken language and reasoning)

The Maths and English are unavoidable, but they are no longer threatening.

Why play lowers resistance

Many adults bring a long memory of judgement, failure or embarrassment into Maths and English learning.

When learning feels high-stakes, learners protect themselves. When learning feels safe, they participate.

Play shifts attention away from: > “Will I get this wrong?” towards: > “What happens if...?”

This pattern-breaking moment reduces psychological threat, encourages curiosity and makes experimentation possible. Confidence begins to rebuild *before* learners realise it is happening.

Inclusive by design — not by exception

Approaches like this are particularly powerful for:

- adults with Maths anxiety
- learners with SEND or working-memory differences

- ESOL learners who benefit from context and repetition
- learners with disrupted or negative educational histories

Inclusive design does not lower standards. It removes unnecessary barriers so learners can access them.

Often described as *“vital for some, valuable for all”*, this approach benefits every learner, not just those with identified needs.

A curriculum design stress-test

If learners engage confidently with Maths and English through games, puzzles and practical scenarios, then ability was never the issue.

Design was.

Activities like this act as a stress-test for curriculum assumptions:

- Are tasks meaningful before they are abstract?
- Is practice allowed before performance is expected?
- Do learners feel safe enough to try?

If engagement rises when stakes are lowered and relevance is increased, the question is not *“Can learners do Maths and English?”*

It is: > *“Have we designed learning so they are willing to engage with it?”*

Not a December-only approach

Play, puzzles and practical contexts are not festive extras.

They are indicators of what works.

The opportunity is not to repeat the same activity year after year, but to replicate the conditions that made learning possible:

- safety before scrutiny
- curiosity before compliance
- confidence before assessment

Reflection questions for leaders and teams

- Where do we unintentionally raise the stakes too early?
- How often do learners get to practise skills without being judged?
- What would change if confidence was treated as a curriculum outcome?

This resource is designed to support reflective curriculum conversations and decision-making. It does not replace professional judgement, it strengthens it.