

Children's Play, Principles and Practice

Play encompasses children's behavior which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward, and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development – not only for individual children but also for the society in which they live.

(Welsh Gov, 2014, pp. 14)



(Source: Shutterstock, 2021)

Contents Page

Page no.

- Section 1 – *Importance of variety of Play types* 3-5
- Section 2 – *Why exposing children to risk is beneficial* 6-7
- Section 3 – *In depth discussion of an observation method* 8-9
- Section 4 – *Role of play when undertaking observation* 10-12
- Reference List 13-15

The Importance of Play

Play in the Early Years is significantly important to children's learning. As Moyles (2010) points out, play and learning are intrinsically linked. Not only structured play, but free play is a fundamental part of learning for young children. The range of play opportunities for children are split into two categories; Freely chosen play (children's self-directed play) and Structured recreational activities (set up and led by adults).

Self-directed play is an important part of developing children's positive attitudes towards their learning. Howard and McInnes (2012) work indicate that there are benefits to children perceiving activities as play. It is said that children having the control of the direction of the play increases independence and confidence, promoting positive emotional well-being.

Herrington and Brussoni (2015) state that natural play spaces provide a more diverse form of play for children of all competencies in the early years. One example of an outdoor space commonly used for play-based activities in early years educational settings are 'Mud Kitchens'. The use of open-ended materials meets the connection with nature and the environment, creating an inclusive area for diverse children and their different interests, allowing exploration and expanding their imagination. Rupiper (2021) suggests that this type of self-directed physical play supports holistic learning, increasing all areas of children's development. It also provides freedom for children to express themselves creatively without the fear of mistakes, and encourages cognitive function, including social cooperation and communication with peers. Small Talk (2015) suggests that older children set specific goals within their play, using maths and science to explore before and after comparisons, and to test their own theories. For example, tipping, pouring and measuring what pots are holding more or less water or mud, considering their own outcomes or premise, demonstrating the use of physical maths. This will be performed while communicating and discussing what they are doing. Whereas in the earlier years, this is a sensory experience that primarily encourages the development of fine motor skills and learn new materials (Welsh Government, 2014).

Lyon (2017) assert that an important aspect of Vygotsky's theory of the psychological development of a child, is learning about the culture to which they belong. It is the role of the teacher to 'arm' children with mental tools, they can later use in social interactions

and progress from assisted performance, and gain independence as they move through their development.

'Scaffolding' is a practical implication of Vygotsky's theory used to capture the nature of support and guidance in learning, teachers can assist children and their learning ideas, without taking lead or interrupting the play (Verenikina, 2008). Vygotsky's theory of 'Zone of Proximal Development' supports the idea that children use 'play' to explore new information and learn about the world around them. Teachers can suggest material that is in reach for the children (what they already know), and by using scaffolding techniques allows children to reach new concepts and ideas of complex topics, which in turn develops their cognitive learning. According to Craig (2017) Vygotsky's theory is based upon social interaction of students, whereas, Piag  's cognitive theory is defined by four stages of development that children go through, and is focused on the development of the learner as an individual. Similarly, both theories support the idea that children learn best when they actively manipulate objects and ideas, to discover a better understanding and knowledge of the world (Craig, 2017).

The holistic development of children is at the centre of The Foundation Phase statutory curriculum framework, providing children with experimental opportunities that are appropriate and inclusive to each child in their individual stage of learning and development (Welsh Government, 2015). Donaldson (2015) highlights the importance of individual learning needs for children in the foundation phase. The new curriculum emphasises the notion of sustained-shared thinking (SST), proposing continuous shared thoughts between the adult and child during interactions. Siraj-Blatchford and Asani (2015) suggest that SST identifies as effective to develop the competence to collaborate with peers and influence their learning in a holistic manner. "Children will be encouraged to engage directly in shaping their own learning, providing examples of achievements that they feel proud of" (Donaldson, 2015, p. 88).

The High-Scope Curriculum (2012) 'promotes initiative and independence' for children during teacher-initiated activities within the classroom. According to Michael-Luna and Heimer (2012), High-Scope encourages children to supply their own ideas in line with the teacher planning and resources made available to them, with the adults as actively involved as the children, 'sharing control' of the child's exploration. While high-scope supports holistic learning through self-direct play, the adult has the role of challenging the children making their play experiences direct.

In contrast, the Scandinavian approach (originating in the work of Frobel), demonstrates the significance of use of the outdoors, and sees it as an opportunity to learn and support children's development in a child-led manner (SBS Dateline, 2016). The high-scope curriculum generates the teachers planning around the intentional outcome of the activity, based upon the traditional academic subjects, however, the Forest schools are focused on supporting the process of the child's creative thinking and learning in self-directed play. Donaldson's new curriculum for Wales has acquired certain aspects within these approaches in order to have a child centred approach (Donaldson, 2015).

Benefits of Risk in Play

“Play is creativity, it is abandon. It is risk, collaboration, interpretation and reinterpretation. It’s meaning is infinite” (Borttrill, 2018 p. 26). Bottrill (2018) suggests ‘real play’ is imaginative, creative and resourceful, and asserts that self-chosen experiments with endless opportunities allows children to invest more thought into their play and have a deeper overall learning experience. Brussoni *et al.* (2012) claims that outdoor free play is a basic and essential need that supports healthy development in children. Exposing children to versatile natural environments of the outdoors has enormous benefits, and is significant in children’s holistic learning through play. Exploring the outdoors promotes creativity, environmental awareness and navigation competencies, additionally encouraging physical aspects of development, such as motor fitness and abilities, primarily calculating risk taking (Early Years Matters, 2021). This corresponds with the foundation phase statutory curriculum framework (2012), offering inclusive opportunities for children to investigate and discover adventure, through holistic learning as individuals or as part of a group supporting social interactions, problem solving and gaining new knowledge and information about their world and the world around them (Welsh government, 2015).

According to Patagonia (2018) at the time children experience failure during risk, it is a teachable moment where they learn what they are capable of, and what they are not yet capable of themselves. This moment of learning provides them with the ability to feel comfortable in taking risks, presents a sense of thrill and excitement, and opens opportunity to test nature for themselves. Bahatheg (2010) asserts that Montessori designed sensory-based activities that support risk from the very first years of a child’s life, the materials influence the development of children’s creative problem solving. Montessori also encourages the child to have bare feet to heighten their senses and enhance learning. As Patagonia (2018) points out, young children play bare foot outdoors in nature, in a safe and controlled environment, can learn what hurts to step on, and black materials in the sun turn hot. Risk is part of life, having risks during play helps children to assess and manage how something happened and why. Keeping children safe involves letting them take risks, and the safety efforts are to be balanced with opportunities and

possibility. Strategies should support epistemological growth to nurture optimal child development (Brussoni *et al.* 2012).

According to Tannock (2011) educators' value of rough and tumble play, as it is recognized to enhance not only physical development but also social development. The benefits should be considered within the framework of concerns and not overlooked by practitioners. On the other hand, concern for the risk of safety of the children can be expressed by many practitioners during rough and tumble play, indicating a lack of information guidelines for educators (Tannock, 2011).

Play focuses on the process rather than the result, it involves uncertainty and flexibility with an element of risk. In general, risky play tests limits and discovers boundaries. Little and Eager (2010) state overcoming fear was a significant component of play, thus building resilience. The mistakes that are made through play is part of problem solving and it is the role of the adult to reassure a positive outlook on the situation.

Ouvry and Furtado (2019) suggest that the role of the practitioner is crucial when supporting children in risky play. Risk assessments are practical forms used to assess an environment prior to an activity. Teachers are able to plan accordingly, using resources and natural resources to create a challenging environment in order to support children's learning through planned play activities. Ouvry and Furtado (2019) assert that designing these opportunities will enhance children's curiosity of the world around them, developing cognitive thinking within their learning. Risk teaches children to construct new concepts, allows them to overcome fears while investigating and communicating with others.

The work of Tuttle and Convery (2015), indicates that Scandinavian-Forest schools provides outdoor learning opportunities for kinaesthetic learning, and is perceived as highly valuable to children's holistic learning, within this, children learn an understanding of the natural world and may consider its resources in the future. It is said that health and wellbeing of children improves when they take part in hands-on activities that are experienced outdoors in natural environments (Tuttle and Convery, 2015). However, Connolly and Haughton (2017) argue that through exposing children to both nature and risk, can alleviate some of the detrimental impacts that existing excitable risk can have on a child's wellbeing.

Observation in Play

The main purpose of observations is to allow practitioners to gather key information and determine where the child is on the learning and development, identifying any signs of difficulties in certain areas, and to ensure children receive appropriate support where needed (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). It is essential that teachers and practitioners are able to carefully obtain evidence that highlights children's individual strengths and weaknesses within academic learning, development and areas of interest, and to consider the collected information for future planning (Early Years Matters, 2020). The Foundation Phase Profile (FPP) is a primary element of the Welsh Government's Early Years Development and Assessment framework. Welsh Government (2017) emphasise the importance of the FPP and how it facilitates practitioners in providing a developmentally appropriate holistic curriculum for children. The profile structure delivers a consistent national baseline for assessments, and aligns with the foundation phase outcomes and children's progress data.

According to Howard and McInnes (2013) experimental studies, children's learning is more effective when the practical tasks are under playful circumstances. An understanding of a child's perspective of play is valuable for practitioners, as it is important for the adult to move away from traditional and formal practice, in order to offer an experience where the child maximum opportunity for self-directed play. Children's involvement coincides with their emotional well-being. Similarly, Early Excellence Ltd (2017) points out, when a child is fully engrossed in what they are doing and enjoying interaction, that their personal, social and emotional development is satisfactory. Children are most engaged when in this state of ease and positive energy, as well, the environment around them and 'play' designed activities supports children's development, offering opportunities of fascination to contact reality around them. In addition, the importance of play in child development has been recognised, and specific play-policies have been developed to ensure appropriate play opportunities within the early years curriculum (Howard and McInnes, 2012).

According to Early Years Matters (2020) the FPP supports observations as every child has a unique set of abilities and talents, observing through play is an effective method that demonstrates a true, and holistic reflection of the child as an individual, as their performance behaviours are enhanced when perceiving the activity as play. Welsh Government (2017) assert that the FPP provides all teachers and partnerships a wide range of information, determining a summative judgment on the child's current stage of development in all areas of academic learning and their individual needs. This supports communication between settings and schools during transitions, and parents which is an important part of a child's education.

However, tutor2u (2020) argue that there are practical, ethical and theoretical issues that can obstruct the outcome of an observation. Children's awareness of being observed can hinder their responses and focus. It is important to maintain validity of the observation, to ensure the activity is perceived as play by the child, demonstrating the children's true ability and development. Welsh Government (2008) point out practical formats that practitioners can use to record and evidence children's progress during observations. Notebooks and sticky notes can be strategically placed around the classroom for easy access, where the adult can quickly write down any significant information that occurs and placed safely until a later time. However, along with recording sheets, these visuals can be an indication of assessment to children, which can change or interrupt the play, and in turn affect the authenticity of the outcome of the observation is lost (Howard and McInnes, 2013).

"Observation of children can be an endlessly fascinating, absorbing and revealing experience. As a tool for study, it is richly interesting and almost always enjoyable" (Fawcett and Watson, 2016). Fawcett and Watson (2016) assert that observation is particularly valuable in supporting children to develop an understanding of the concept 'a holistic view'. It encourages the notion that children are unique individuals, and their development is shaped by various components. Similarly, Howard and McInnes (2012) implies constructing creative environments for children increases the interest in an activity, and self-directed play can be encouraged by the practitioner, and when observing self-directed play, the adult awaits cues from the child to join the play, observing from a distance allows the practitioner to have an overall view of the child, in a holistic manner.

Role of Play in Observation

Children's play is self-motivated, and children engage in play for the sake of their own pleasure (Herrington, 2015). Free play is child-led and naturally spontaneous, whereas, structured play occurs during specific time, such as observations, and is generally organised by adults. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef,2020) have encompassed the child's right to play in Article 31, demonstrating the importance of play, and how it is considered to be a fundamental part of childhood (Welsh Government, 2015).

Howard and McInnes (2013) work indicated the significance of children's perspective of play, and how the practitioner is more likely to discover the child's optimal learning capabilities when the child is fully immersed in the play. Additionally, the work of Wood (2013) highlights the importance of consent, and supporting ethical respect of the child when undertaking observations. It is essential for practitioners to be mindful not to change or interrupt play when observing children, but to have an awareness of invitational cues. Children use a variety of cues to differentiate between activities that are perceived as play and those that are not. Practitioners can utilise these cues to maintain the child's perception of the play, and to provide a foundation for play, learning and adult presence (Howard and McInnes, 2013).

Early Years Matters (2020) emphasise play as a holistic view, of the child's development in observations. For example, a child playing with small farm animal figures will use their hands and fingers to pick up the toys up and move them around, which increases physical development such as fine motor skills. Meanwhile, the child will use language and communication skills to describe what they are doing out loud, sometimes with peers and, or teachers, which can also be seen as a cue for practitioners to listen and watch, this can enrich personal, social and emotional development. The child may consider the names of the animals and what different noises they make, or what they look like. Practitioners are able to make a connection of this to the child's understanding of the world, presenting a holistic view of the child's development from observing just one activity (Welsh Government, 2015).

The starting point for observations is the child. Observing children's personal interests, and what resources they enjoy playing with, offers adults reliable information that can be used to facilitate high quality planning (Early Years Matters, 2020).

The teacher actively participates in the educational experience by creating and disseminating knowledge in partnership with children and colleagues. The teacher is an advocate, collaborator, researcher and facilitator.

(McNally and Slutsky, 2017)

Hong, Shaffer and Han (2016) claim the Reggio Emilia approach consists of designing an appropriate learning environment rich in resources, and observing and documenting learner interactions with the learning environment. The FPP involves collecting data from observations, and to carefully review and updated progress throughout the learner's development. When planning play opportunities, it is important for the child to see the activity as play. Creating inclusive and exciting environments requires the adult to consider the child's interests and experiences, which in turn will enhance the overall experience (Howard and McInnes, 2012).

While it is useful to use early years outcome as guidance when planning activities for observation, practitioners should be mindful of adapting them to meet the individual needs and interests, and the settings environments and resources. Kerry Payne (2019) suggests practitioners use a range of contributors to observations, such as photos, samples of work and observation forms. This will also support communication between colleagues, external agencies, schools and parents of the child. The quality of planning can impact the outcome of the observation (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). More recently, daily (in the moment) planning is becoming more popular. It is evident that teachers benefit from 'next steps' noting at the exact time of an observation, which is identified and reflected in their future practice or teaching. But also, the adult is able to record without interrupting the play, which achieves a more authentic record of a child's development, this technique aligns with McInnes *et al.* (2013) work, that asserts children reveal themselves when they are completely committed to the play.

Donaldson (2015) state that practitioners should consider effective planning, clear purposes of activity and observation, recognise elements that stimulate learning and view assessment as an on-going resource.

Setting up specific activities primarily for observing children in the early years is not always seen as an efficient, practitioners should consider if the child is not going to take full interest in the activity, do they really see it as play? While play may occur, is the child's level of commitment genuine? It is vital practitioners are able to adapt planned activities, to encourage the child's interest and support self-directed play (Hong, Shaffer and Han, 2016).

Reference List

Bahatheg, O, R. (2010) 'How the Use of Montessori Material Supports Children's Creative Problem Solving in the Pre-school Classroom', University of Southampton Available at: https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/193317/1/Raja-Thesis-Final_Draft-25th-June-2011-new..pdf [Accessed: 16 January 2021]

Bottrill, G. (2018) *Can I Go & Play Now? Rethinking the Early Years*. Learning Matters Ltd, SAGE

Brussoni, M. *et al* (2012) 'Risky Play and Children's Safety: Balancing Priorities for Optimal Child Development' *Environmental Research and Public Health*, pp. 3134-3148. DOI: 10.3390/ijerph9093134

Connolly, M. and Houghton, C. (2017) 'The perception, management and performance of risk amongst Forest School Educators', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. Cardiff Met Available at: <https://repository.cardiffmet.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10369/9267/The%20perception%20%20management%20and%20performance%20of%20risk%20amongst%20Forest%20School%20educators.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> [Accesses: 16 January 2021]

Craig, A. (2017) Piaget vs. Vygotsky: Theories of Cognitive Development [Video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yV37wEWGWIM> (Accessed: 16 January 2021)

Donaldson, G. (2015) '*Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales*', Scarlet Design International Ltd.

Early Excellence Ltd (2017) How Does Well-being Involvement Contribute to the Quality of Learning [Video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZPrMbppyhA> [Accessed: 17 January 2021]

Early Years Matters (2018) *The Importance of Play*. Available at: <https://www.earlyyearsmatters.co.uk/eyfs/a-unique-child/play-learning/> [Accessed: 15 January 2021]

Early Years Matters (2020) Observation, Assessment and Planning. Available at: <https://www.earlyyearsmatters.co.uk/eyfs/a-unique-child/planning/>

Early Years Matters (2021) *Indoor and Outdoor Environment*. Available at: <https://www.earlyyearsmatters.co.uk/our-services/school-and-nursery-improvement-partner/enabling-environments/indoor-and-outdoor-environment/> [Accessed: 16 January 2021]

Fawcett, M. and Watson, D. (2016) *Learning Through Child Observations*. 3rd edn. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Herrington, S and Brussoni, M. (2015) 'Beyond physical activity: The importance of play and Nature, play based spaces for children's health and development' *Current Obesity Reports*, 4(4), pp. 477-483 DOI: 10.1007/s13679-015-0279-2

Hong, S, LaShorage, S. and Han, J. (2016) 'Reggio Emilia Inspired Groups: Relationships, Communication, Cognition, and Play', *Early Childhood Education*. DOI: 10.1007/s10643-016-0811-0

Howard J. and McInnes, K. (2012) 'The impact of children's perception of an activity as play rather than not play on emotional well-being', *Child: care, health and development*, pp. 737-742. DOI: 10.1111/j.1365-2214.2012.01405.x

Karry Payne (2019) 'An Introduction to Observation, Assessment and Planning' Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efq_EYdkln4 [Accessed: 17 January 2021]

Little, H. and Eager, D. (2010) 'Risk, challenge and safety: implications for play quality and playground design', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 18(4), pp. 497-513. DOI: 10.1080/1350293X.2010.525949

Lyon, P. (2017) Vygotsky and Scaffolding [Video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AoLk5nbliM> [Accessed: 15 January 2021]

McInnes, K. *et al* (2013) 'The nature of adult-child interaction in the early years classroom: Implications for children's perceptions of play and subsequent learning behaviour', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 21(2), pp. 168-282 DOI: 10.1080/1350293X.2013.789194

McNally, S, A. and Slutsky, R. (2017) 'Key element of the Reggio Emilia approach and how they are interconnected to create the highly regarded system of early childhood education', *Early Child Development and Care*. 197(12), pp. 1925-1937. DOI: 10.1080/03004430.2016.1197920

Michael-Luna, S and Heimer, L, G. (2012) 'Creative curriculum and Highscope curriculum' *Curriculum in Early Childhood Education*, pp. 120-132

Moyles, J. (2018) *The Excellence of Play*. 4th edn. McGraw Hill Education: Open University Press

Ouvry, M. and Furtado, A. (2019) *Exercising Muscles and Minds, Second Edition: Outdoor Play and the Early Years Curriculum*. 2nd edn. Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Patagonia (2018) The reward of Risk | Building Confidence in Kids [Video] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cXNXJhJjV0 [Accessed 16 January 2021]

Rupiper, M. (2021) 'Mud, marvellous mud!' Available at: <https://www.communityplaythings.co.uk/learning-library/articles/mud-marvellous-mud> [Accessed: 15 January 2021]

SBS Dateline (2016) Denmark's Forest Kindergartens [Video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jkii9dJfcw> [Accessed: 16 January 2021]

Shutterstock (2021) *Play Children Clipart Images, Stock Photos & Vectors* | Shutterstock. [Image] Available at: <https://www.shutterstock.com/search/play+children+clipart> [Accessed: 15 January 2021]

Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Asani, R. (2015) *The role of sustained shared thinking, play and metacognition in young Children's learning*. Available at: <https://www.citethisforme.com/> [Accessed 16 January 2021]

Small Talk (2015) Mud Kitchens – learning through play and mud! [Video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LVBDXeZo49g> [Accessed: 16 January 2021]

Tannock, M. (2011) 'Young Children's Rough and Tumble Play: Apprehensions and Opportunities', *Canadian Children*, pp. 4-12

Turtle, C. and Convery, K. (2015) 'Forest Schools and environmental attitudes: A case study of children aged 8-11 years', *Student Learning, Childhood & Voices*. pp.1-14. Available at: <https://www.cogentoa.com/article/10.1080/2331186X.2015.1100103.pdf> [Accessed: 16 January 2021]

Tutor2u (2020) Research Methods: Observations (Sociology Theory & Methods) [Video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGXdorYr4Bg> [Accessed: 17 January 2021]

Unicef (2020) Summary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Available at: https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_summary-1.pdf [Accessed: 17 January 2021]

Verenikina, I. (2008) 'Scaffolding and learning: its role in nurturing new learners' Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=edupapers> [Accessed: 16 January 2021]

Welsh Assembly Government (2008) Observing Children. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/api/storage/74f7c7cc-d337-4fd0-9604-27b3d1a5746d/observing-children.pdf> [Accessed: 17 January 2021]

Welsh Government (2014) Wales – a Play Friendly Country. Available at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/wales-a-play-friendly-country.pdf> [Accessed: 15 January 2021]

Welsh Government (2015) 'Foundation Phase Framework'. *Curriculum for Wales*. Available at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-02/foundation-phase-framework-revised-2015.pdf> [Accessed: 16 January 2021]

Welsh Government. (2015) *Programme for Children and Young People*. Available at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-06/seven-core-aims-for-children-and-young-people.pdf> [Accessed: 17 January 2021].

Welsh Government (2017) Foundation Phase Profile Handbook. Available at: <https://www.earlyyears.wales/sites/www.earlyyears.wales/files/foundation-phase-profile-handbook-revised-september-2017.pdf> [Accessed: 17 January 2021]