

Children's play: theory and practice

Section 1

Kushchner, (2008) states that play is an ongoing debate and discussion. Everybody will have different definitions. Gordon, (2008) supports this stating that depending on different backgrounds growing up, there will be different conclusions and definitions on what play really is. Play has elements of uncertainty and takes children out of reality in different ways. Children are intrinsically motivated to play and play is essential to the quality of life (Gordon, 2008). Voce, (2015) highlights the importance of play stating Article 31 is the right for children to play. Voce, (2015, p. 7) states play should be "respected, protected and fulfilled". This means children should be able to fulfil their expectations of play, learn and participate freely. Andrews, (2012) states that play has important benefits to social well-being, physical well-being and intellectual development. Vygotsky indicated a clear link between play and development. He believes that all the developmental tendencies that are needed can be developed through play (Pound, 2017). Also, Andrews, (2012) says play is the main source of holistic development. Similarly, Smith, (2009) shows us Piaget's theory that there is a strong relationship between play, thought and language. Through play, schemas are able to go through the two step process of accommodation and assimilation. Assimilation involves a child adding a new experience to an existing schema which is balanced by accommodation which is the child adjusting to the existing schema to fit with the nature of the environment (Smith, 2009). Additionally Smith, (2009) adds that play should be enjoyable. Andrews, (2012) and Smith, (2009) demonstrate the holistic development that play has on young children as it allows physical, social, emotional, intellectual developments. This can take place through many different types of play.

One type of play is sensory play. This allows children to learn and understand the world through their senses. Moyles, (2012) demonstrates the benefits of sensory play on young children. Children have the opportunity to explore, problem-solve and use symbolic play at the same time. This enables them to develop their creativity. Sensory play can be simple and can cost very little. Moyles, (2012) provides an example of sensory play as jumping in muddy puddles as they get to feel 'at one'

with nature and learn 'cause and effect' on their own. Through muddy puddles children get to experience the mystery, the noise of the splash, their feet becoming cold and water in their wellies. Freedom in sensory play allows new experiences and memories that benefit young children by improving their concentration skills, their determination and their problem-solving skills providing intellectual development. Pound, (2017) states Komensky's theory supports these views as he found sensory experiences enhance learning, providing development holistically. Releasing tension through the sensory materials allows emotional development. According to Moyles, (2012) sensory play creates a new 'pathway' in the brain. This allows intellectual development as the more connections that are made and reinforced the thicker the pathway gets with faster signals enabling them to think and recall events more accurately.

An example of sensory play is Forest Schools offering freedom to discover new things (Knight, 2011). These are play based, child-led and allow risky play that enable children to learn how to manage a risk and prevent further risks on their own. The freedom to move around and explore provides opportunity for physical and social development. Forest schools have health and developmental benefits from this that build character and personality traits (Knight, 2011).

Another type of play is make-believe play. This could include symbolization, pretending or story telling. According to Ariel, (2002) children learn real life activities without even realising it. Make-believe play is a mental activity that can be verbal, non-verbal or both allowing the child to develop their communication and social skills. They can act out mental images they have seen before, for example, their mother making dinner. However they could also create a whole new identity to act out such as a dinosaur. Ariel, (2002) suggests this allows opportunity for creativity development. Following on from this, Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, and Singer (2006) state Vygotsky's theory that he regards make-believe play as the most important early childhood activity for development and self-regulation as it provides lots of opportunities for language practice and engagement with others again supporting their social development. Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, and Singer (2006) expand on this

stating children can become more advanced, socially responsible and are able to learn social rules allowing behaviour development such as a child pretending to sleep complies with bedtime behaviour. Children need to be provided with enabling equipment to encourage this play, for example, real cups that the children can feed their doll with. Another benefit of this is they learn to take turns and share which can also improve their conversations allowing them to take turns during a conversation. Ariel, (2002) and Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, and Singer (2006) both highlight the opportunities for social, intellectual and behaviour development through make-believe play.

Section 2

Fisher, (2021) describes self-directed play as allowing children to take control of their learning. Children want to experiment and explore with freedom. Each child is different and therefore learns differently. Gray, (2013) supports this stating that children are born intrinsically motivated and naturally learn through instincts and drive. They need to play using their own independence with no specific goal just through their own curiosity. Gray, (2013) says children learn a range of information in the first four years of their lives as they are born with the motivation to learn however this does not stop when they start school at the age of five, in fact it continues. Ephgrave, (2020) develops this stating self-directed play is important because when children have autonomy of their own learning they are enabled to develop holistically. They develop intellectually as they are engaged in their learning therefore their brains are developing and creating new synapses. However, Ephgrave (2020) expands on this saying that when a child is not interested in their learning they are not engaged and are unable to progress. Children need to feel secure and involved in order to develop. Therefore if a child is not engaged for a long period of time this will need to be monitored as this can prevent them from forming empathy or new relationships in the future. If children are bored or anxious they are distracted, leading to prevention of their brain forming new synapses. Ephgrave, (2018) states that self-directed play should always prioritise the well-being of the child. Howard and McInnes, (2013) suggest it is important to understand children's own perspective of play as they found children gain more from their learning when they perceive it as

'play' in comparison to 'non-play'. Similarly, Fisher, (2021) states the importance self-directed play has on emotional development as they will be in a calm and purposeful atmosphere and will have the confidence and self esteem of being included in their learning.

The role of the adult is very important during self-directed play (Bottrill, 2022). Adults facilitate by enabling, listening, reacting, guiding when necessary and challenging when appropriate to. However it is important adults don't interrupt play. Fisher, (2018) states the role of the adult is to "interact and not interfere". Adults should form a positive relationship with each child. Pound, (2017) discusses Bowlby's theory of attachment. When children form a trusting relationship with an adult they should feel safe and secure. This will make the child feel comfortable to explore, learn and develop. A child who is unhappy will be distracted and unable to learn therefore it is important the adults create attachments with each child in order for them to develop (Pound, 2017).

Fisher, (2021) believes adults' central ethos is to provide a flexible and responsive environment to enable self-directed play in the setting. This allows each child to thrive in their own way. Hodgeman, (2012) states Steiner's theory that children should be raised in an environment with natural and open ended resources as well as Vygotsky's theory that the social and cultural environment that children are raised in plays a significant role in their learning. Both of these link to adults advocating self-directed play as they provide the opportunity for children to experiment in a safe and stimulating environment (Hodgeman, 2012). A Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, (2022) states the requirements an adult should provide in an enabling environment. It should provide them with a sense of security whilst providing the opportunity of elements of risk play. It should have a quiet section to provide a place for their emotional well being and allow a place to rest. The environment should show appreciation for the world with natural open-ended resources from around the world ensuring there is multicultural representation to provide a sense of belonging to every child and also to develop their emotional well being (A Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, 2022).

Adults will not need to plan as much as the children are in charge of their learning, instead they will need to observe, assess and record any relevant information (Ephgrave, 2020). This will take a lot of stress away from the adult and benefit their well-being. Observations should take place in every area of the setting at different time of day. Hodgeman, (2012) states in order for children to keep directing their own place, adults should observe areas that are not used and update them. King and Newstead, (2020) states adults should follow the play cycle. This allows children to engage in their own play with no adulteration. This means adults should be knowledgeable and ensure they are not directing or controlling the child's play in any way (Macdonald, 2022).

Gaspar (2009) states that Reggio Emilia in Italy focuses on self-directed play which values the imagination of the child. This then allows them to become creative making their own experiences. They are in charge of their own learning. Rinaldi, (2006) demonstrates that their natural curiosity provides their own development. Reggio Emilia has educated staff who allow distance to observe their children without disturbing their play. They are passionate members of staff that provide consistency, passion and commitment.

Section 3

According to Barber and Paul-Smith, (2010) observations are essential in an early years setting. Through watching the children, the adult can begin to understand and learn about the child individually. They can understand the aim of their play and support it if necessary (Barber and Paul-Smith, 2010).

Ephgrave, (2018) suggests creating a learning journal is a beneficial observation method used in an early years setting. These begin blank with the child's name and the date you are observing on. Sometimes they might have certain focus points on them provided by staff or parents. Ephgrave, (2018) states that the adult will begin observing the play, then assess what they are watching. This is followed by planning how to respond if necessary and finally teach the next steps. This allows teachable

moments in a unique way suited to each child without interrupting their play. These will then be recorded. This observation cycle takes place multiple times throughout the day however some teaching moments might not be major therefore not recorded (Sancisi and Edgington, 2015). According to Ephgrave, (2020) an example of this is observing a child attempting to use scissors then assessing whether they need support before responding. If they are unable to use the scissors a teaching moment would be helping the child learn how to use them. However if they are still finding this difficult this would be recorded in a focus points section for other staff or parents to continue to practise with the child. Children learn and develop in the moment therefore actioning their development immediately is more beneficial to their holistic development rather than writing it down to do at a later date (Ephgrave, 2020). Barber and Paul-Smith (2010) supports this by stating that flexible and spontaneous observations result in more meaningful observations. These can be called “snapshot observations”. Ephgrave, (2020) says that the natural observations do not make the children feel like they are being tested whilst still meeting legal requirements. Ephgrave, (2018) says parents can then receive a copy of their learning journey and can add to it, allowing a positive relationship between the care worker and the children's families. This supports Froebel's theory that children are more likely to benefit holistically when parents are included in their education (Pound, 2017). Ephgrave, (2020) states these observations take place with 10% of the class over three years and 20% of the class under two years each week, once a term. These are called “focus children” and different staff members will have input into each child to make them more accurate. Parents can discuss any section of their learning journeys with the adults (Ephgrave, 2018).

Ephgrave, (2020) states a benefit of a learning journey observation is the well-being of the child is prioritised as they are under no pressure to all be learning at the same level. Instead they are leading their own play and being observed naturally which reduces the risk of the child behaving differently if they think they are being tested. This will benefit the child's emotional well-being. Both Ephgrave, (2020) and Paul-Smith, (2010) believe it is more beneficial for the child to be observed without the adult interfering, enabling self-directed play. This will build the child's confidence

in the setting benefitting their holistic development. Additionally, Ephgrave, (2022) implies the 'invisible' child will be visible as each child will get quality interactions with the adult. This supports Bowlby's theory of the importance of a relationship between child and adult on their emotional well-being (Pound, 2017). The chance of biased observations are unlikely as different staff will observe the child throughout the week providing a more accurate and fair observation (Barber and Paul-Smith, 2010). Sancisi and Edgington, (2015) state that snapshot observations are quick and easy to allow more interaction time with the children rather than having lots of paperwork away from them. Ephgrave, (2020) supports this and states that it also benefits the adults well-being with less stress. The journeys get updated every term so are always relatively up to date and the information is concise and relevant (Ephgrave, 2018).

However, Barber and Paul-Smith, (2010) state staff should be knowledgeable and have a clear understanding of what they are observing, therefore a limitation could be some staff might not have enough confidence or passion to complete correctly. The children might not play how they usually would due to factors at home or in the setting that are affecting their behaviour and might not be a true representation of the individual (Barber and Paul-Smith, 2010). Ephgrave, (2020) states every child should be observed once a term however there might not be enough time or staff to complete this. Barber and Smith-Paul, (2010) indicate that observations should take place in different areas at various times however if the child plays in the same area everyday the holistic development is limited and the observation will be too basic. Ephgrave, (2018) states in order for this observation method to work the environment must be enabling supporting Bronfenbrenner's theory that an enabling environment is needed for children to learn and holistically develop (Pound, 2017).

Te Whāriki is a curriculum that promotes diversity and creates confident and capable learners using learning journeys (Chicken and Whitehouse, 2022). Carr *et al*, (2005) states they record any significant moments down from the child's day rather than assess specific skills. Adults aim to look for teaching opportunities. It has been successful and the parents gave positive feedback about being included.

Section 4

Howard, (2010) states that when children are playing they tend to lose their fear, creating more flexible play. Howard and McInnes, (2013) reveal that observing children when playing is the optimal time to see their capabilities and main interest allowing a true reflection of the child to be observed. Howard (2010) and Howard and McInnes, (2013) both suggest that observing play provides adults with an accurate reflection of the child's development. Steiner's theory is that children leading their play encourages them to interact and benefit their holistic development (Bruce, 2010). Similarly, Stagnitti (2004) argues that play shows an accurate reflection of their development as adults can see the areas the child can achieve and also highlight any focus points they are not reaching yet. Barber and Paul-Smith, (2010) states this creates meaningful observation.

MacLeod-Brudenell, (2004) demonstrates the value play has on observations and assessing. Children are more confident through play and are aware of their abilities. Children often explore new things through play. MacLeod-Brudenell, (2004) believes that through observing play adults can begin to understand and learn about the individual child. By assessing the observations adults can unravel their play and interpret what they are seeing to understand how a child might be feeling. Similarly, A Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings (2022) states through play you can develop the 5 pathways. These are belonging, communication, exploration, physical development and well-being. Adults should provide an environment that will enable the opportunity to develop holistically. When observing these pathways adults need to be aware that it is normal for some children to have faster or slower progress and to celebrate individuality (A Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, 2022).

Barber and Paul-Smith, (2010) believe it is important that play is not interrupted but is observed instead to create a calm atmosphere. Broadhead, (2004) states adults can support this by only intervening in their play if a child is unhappy or in danger. This will provide children with time to play and build momentum in their play to

naturally develop such as beginning to include others in their game or communicating, developing their social well-being. However if an adult interrupts the play and asks the child if they would speak to another child they might become shy and not show their social development. This highlights the importance of observing play and shows that play gives a true reflection of a child's development (Ephgrave, 2018).

Howards and McInnes, (2013) findings highlight the importance of play when observing. They allocated children into two separate groups one 'like play' and another 'not like play'. The children in the 'like play' all scored significantly higher. In addition to this, their emotional and behavioural well-being was much better than the children in the 'not like play' group. Howards and McInnes, (2013) found that when children perceived learning as play they developed more. This implies adults should be trained and understand children's views on play and use the information they have gathered into their setting through the environment and planning, to maximise the development of the child (Howard and McInnes, 2013). McInnes, *et al.* (2011) state that when planning adults should consider if the activity would be seen as playful to ensure the children will be engaged. In order to do this, the care workers will have to observe the children play to create authentic and purposeful learning. This highlights the importance of observing play (A Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, 2022).

Bruce, (2010) states the importance of knowledgeable adults in order to recognise the holistic development in the child. By observing and assessing day to day activities, the adult will begin to learn about the child and what they are capable of. According to Bruce, (2010) when observing play the adult should be open-minded with what they are observing. Watching a child put dressing up clothes on might not seem special however they are watching physical development as well as the child growing independence. Spending quality time with the child will begin to create nurturing relationships which is very important in order to write about the child (Ephgrave, 2020). MacLeod-Brudnell, (2004) states the adult providing the best care

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they can will result in rewarding observations as they are able to watch the child develop holistically.

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