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## **Children's play theory and practice.**

### **Section 1-**

Play is a bond that connects children across different cultures, allowing them to express themselves and communicate their thoughts and feelings without the need to use speech. It allows children to interact with the world around them and helps them to understand one another to make sense of the environment around them. Through play, children engage in observation, testing, and trying, imitating all whilst enjoying their surroundings and the people involved within them. When a child is given the freedom, time, and space, a child then finds play a natural activity. Children follow their own play patterns and communicate their play ideas in so many ways. Play Scotland (2025) states that play is defined as being freely chosen by a child, where a child will play without a goal or reward. Commonly, their play will be linked with likes and interests.

Physical play is a vital component of early childhood development, encompassing a wide range of activities that encourage children to move freely and explore their surroundings. This type of play includes essential skills such as climbing, skipping, and running, all of which contribute to the overall development of gross motor skills while promoting overall health and fitness. However, physical play is not solely about large movements; it also encompasses activities that involve smaller motions, such as painting and drawing. These activities are just as critical in the early stages of a child's life, as they help develop fine motor skills and enhance creativity. Engaging in diverse forms of physical play encourages children to interact with their environment and build confidence and social skills through cooperative play with peers. By incorporating both large and small movements into their daily routines, children not only strengthen their bodies but also lay a solid foundation for future learning and development, making physical play an essential aspect of their growth and well-being. The Sector (2022).

Imaginary play is considered a vital part of children's development, as highlighted by Vygotsky, who viewed it as a "leading factor in development." This type of play creates a unique area of learning where children can explore various challenging

skills. Vygotsky (1933) believes that one of the most significant outcomes of imaginative play is the enhancement of self-regulation.

Vygotsky identified two key aspects of make-believe play that contribute to this development. First, when children create imaginary scenarios using different objects, they learn to tell the difference between their own ideas and the world around them. For example, when a child uses a cup as a hat or a block as a phone, they change the usual meaning of those objects, which helps them to develop their imaginary play. This play encourages children to rely more on their thoughts rather than impulses when making decisions. Vygotsky pointed out that pretend play involves following rules. In these imaginary situations, children often impose limits on their own actions, such as when they pretend to serve dinner or look after a poorly doll. By separating mental symbols from reality, children enhance their ability to regulate their actions. Engaging in rule-based play also helps them respond to social expectations and act in ways that are considered acceptable.

Vygotsky believed that imaginative play offers young children the best opportunity to develop self-regulation and a sense of responsibility, making it a vital aspect of their growth and learning. Often, adults believe that imaginative play is only for children, but it is something everyone can enjoy. During imaginative play, you can become anyone and anything you like, wherever and whenever you like.

For children, imaginative play is vital for developing critical thinking skills, following simple directions, and enhancing both expressive and receptive language. It also boosts social skills and teaches them how to manage their emotions. This type of play is not just about having fun; it's crucial for learning important life skills that will benefit them well as they grow. Spivey, M. (2024).

## **Section 2-**

Kart, N (2021) states that self-directed play is a form of play that allows children to choose their activities and create their own rules. One example of this is loose parts play, which sparks creativity, thinking, and problem-solving while developing a sense of wonder in children's minds. Loose parts play includes a range of natural or manufactured materials that children can use within their play in various ways, such as moving, carrying, combining, lining up, or dismantling to enhance their play experiences. One huge benefit of loose parts play is its open-ended resources, which encourage the children to learn independently at their own pace. With no actual rules, children can use these resources to play in whatever way they would like to. Loose parts play provides endless opportunities for children to play. This sparks imagination to use within different types of play that also align with each child's developmental stage and interests. Loose parts play restores what has often been a limited resource for children: the opportunity for children to use their own learning experiences. As children engage with loose parts, they naturally develop essential skills and traits such as critical thinking, cooperative learning, problem-solving, negotiation, conflict resolution, and resilience. These skills are crucial not only in educational settings but also in various aspects of life. When interacting with loose parts, children learn to express their ideas and discuss these with their peers, problem-solving how to use the different materials, and resolve disagreement that may happen during their play. The hands-on experience of loose parts play encourages children to experiment and explore, nurturing curiosity and a love for learning. Therefore, loose parts play is an effective way to promote child-directed play, enabling children to explore, create, and learn at their own pace.

Aurora Early Education (No date) states that it is paramount for adults to support children's play by being there for them without then taking control. Play should be child-led; when adults step in too much, it can take away from the fun and learning of that individual child's play. Children need the chance to explore on their own, which then in turn helps them to discover what they like in order to build their confidence. One way for adults to help is by joining in as a playmate. When a child has someone to play alongside them through role-play, it shows children that you care about their interests and enjoy spending time with them. This level of involvement helps create a strong bond and makes playtime more meaningful.

Sometimes, adults do not need to become involved in their play; it is okay to sit back and observe children do things like painting or building. This lets children focus on being creative without feeling rushed or directed to do anything. Children are able to make their own choices and learn from what they do, which is really important for their growth. When adults provide a supportive environment for play and respect children's choices/boundaries, it helps children learn and explore in a fun way. This kind of playtime is essential for developing important skills and a love for learning that will benefit them throughout their lives. By being supportive and letting children lead, adults can help create a positive experience that encourages curiosity and creativity. Playing independently is vital for children's growth as it enables them to explore their interests, develop a sense of independence, and improve their concentration and problem-solving skills. Many young children are naturally drawn to solitary play, which allows them to learn how to entertain themselves, discover their preferences, and interact with the world around them. During solitary play, children can immerse themselves in their activities without distractions. This freedom enables creativity, as they can experiment with different ideas, materials, and scenarios at their own pace. For instance, when a child engages in building blocks alone, they can try various structures, learning about balance and stability as they go. This hands-on experience is vital for children's cognitive development. Solitary play encourages children to make their own decisions independently. They learn to navigate challenges, whether it's figuring out how to assemble a puzzle or deciding how to use their toys in a new way. This process not only builds their confidence but also enhances their critical thinking skills. While adults can support this type of play by providing a safe and stimulating environment, it's important for them to step back and allow children the space to explore on their own. By doing so, adults empower children to take the lead, creating a sense of autonomy that is essential for their overall development. Ultimately, solitary play is a valuable aspect of childhood that nurtures creativity, independence, and essential life skills. Bright Horizons (no date).

### **Section 3-**

Observing children in childcare settings includes a range of different strategies, such as ensuring the staff member is always present during an observation, paying attention to the children's actions as well as listening to their conversations, and recording what you see and hear to understand their play patterns and their learning and development through play. By watching each individual child's physical movements, expressions, and interactions, you can gain understanding into their developmental progress, interests, and preferred learning styles. This also helps practitioners understand how they engage with both peers and adults.

Through careful observation, carers can determine if a child's growth is on track for their age range, assess whether the available resources and environment (like toys or equipment) are supporting their developmental needs, and identify any additional support the child might need to develop new skills and interests.

Observation is an ongoing process that requires regular monitoring and reviewing of evidence to ensure children are reaching key developmental milestones. If any concerns arise, observations can help identify specific areas where a child may need extra support, allowing for timely interventions.

This process also includes keeping track of these observations. The more childcare practitioners record, the deeper their understanding and analysis of the child will be. It's essential to concentrate on what a child has accomplished rather than on what they haven't. Effective observations should be factual, detailed, and accurate, capturing everything observed and heard. It's best to note these observations in real-time throughout the day instead of trying to recall them later, as some details may be missed. Azilo Training (No date).

The Leuven scale is a simple yet effective way to assess how children feel emotionally and how involved they are within their play. It has five levels. 1.

Extremely Low: The child shows clear signs of being very dysregulated, for example, crying or being extremely upset. 2. Low: The child seems unhappy, showing shyness, finding it difficult to engage, or getting outbursts of upsetness.

3. Moderate: The child is neutral, neither happy or sad, and participates in activities without much interest. This level can be overlooked, but with support, children can improve their emotional well-being.

This scale gives carers a clear understanding to be able to support children's emotional needs better. Learning journals (2024).

Observation and assessments are crucial in early years settings. By effectively using the Leuven Scale, which highlights the understanding of children's emotional well-being and engagement during play. Including these practices in their reflective approach can massively enhance one's knowledge of each child's development. However, assessing emotional well-being presents unique challenges compared to evaluating more straightforward skills like math or language. The emotional aspects of a child's life are often difficult and require careful consideration to use accurately. One of the main reasons a one-off observation is not enough to get a full picture of the child's developmental stages is that children are constantly developing. Their feelings and behaviours can change completely from one day to another. Their development depends on various factors such as their environment, social interactions, and personal experiences. For example, a child may arrive at school feeling cheerful and engaged, but by the afternoon, they might be withdrawn or upset due to a minor incident or a change in routine. This variability makes it essential to observe children over time rather than relying on a single snapshot of their emotional state. Arnerich, M. (2021) states that children often copy/reenact different behaviours in their play. A child may be lively and expressive when playing alone but may become shy or reserved in group activities or environments. This difference can stem from different issues, including their level of comfort with peers, the group, or even their mood on a particular day. Therefore, understanding a child's emotional well-being requires observing them in multiple different ways and situations to gain an overall view of their behaviour. In order to truly capture a child's emotional feelings, regular observations and assessments are absolutely necessary. This approach allows carers to track changes in behaviour and emotional dysregulation over time, providing a bigger picture of the child's experiences. By documenting these observations, carers can identify patterns and triggers, which can inform strategies to support the child's emotional development effectively.

The importance of observation and assessment in the context of the Leuven Scales cannot be overstated. These practices enable carers to develop a deeper understanding of children's emotional well-being and engagement. By recognising that a child's emotional state can increase and decrease depending on their environment and social interactions, carers can better support their development and develop a nurturing environment that promotes emotional growth. Observing and

assessing children ultimately leads to more meaningful and effective interventions tailored to each child's individual needs. Arnerich, M. (2021).

Montessori in Real Life (2019) believes that it is essential for adults to create a supportive environment for children to play. Adults can do this by being present without overstepping into the activity too much. When children lead their own play, they enjoy it more and learn valuable lessons. If adults intervene too much, it can take away from the fun and exploration.

One effective way to support children is by participating in their play as a partner. Engaging in imaginative activities together, like role-playing, shows children that their interests matter and that you enjoy spending time with them. This involvement not only strengthens your bond but also enhances the play experience.

Adults can sometimes take a step back and observe while children engage in creative activities like painting or sculpting with clay. This is okay; it's sometimes very beneficial to just stand back and observe.

#### **Section 4:**

Mohammed, T. (2023) describes observations of play to be a common place that children naturally convey their thoughts, emotions, and ideas without even realising it. This form of expression allows them to feel secure and comfortable. In any environment, children will automatically respond to their surroundings and interact with their peers. However, play remains their most common way of expressing themselves, making it a valuable moment for adults who observe them.

When children engage in play, they often reveal their inner thoughts, demonstrating their understanding of various concepts, social dynamics, and emotional responses. For example, a child pretending to be a superhero may express feelings of bravery or a feeling of control, while another child playing with dolls might explore relationships and empathy. These scenarios provide adults with a window into the child's perspective, highlighting their interests and concerns.

As adults, we can use these insights gained from observing children's play to better support their development. By understanding the themes and emotions that emerge during play, we can support their learning experiences effectively. This means providing the necessary support and resources that align with their interests and developmental needs. For example, if a child shows an interest with animals during play, an adult can introduce books or activities related to wildlife, further enriching the child's understanding.

By recognising the authenticity of children's play, adults are able to enhance learning opportunities. If a child demonstrates a specific skill or interest, adults can build on that interest, encouraging further exploration and development. This approach creates an environment where children feel validated and motivated to learn, as they see their interests cared for and supported by the adults around them.

Play serves as a powerful tool for children's expression and learning. It is through their playful interactions that they make sense of the world, develop social skills, and process their emotions. By paying close attention to their play, adults can gain invaluable insights into the child's mindset and experiences. This understanding enables adults to create supportive environments that nurture children's growth, ensuring they have the resources and encouragement needed to thrive.

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