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AI Declaration: I used Co-Pilot, I gave the following prompts;

Prompt one: What kind of play can be linked to Piaget

Prompt two: What is a play that is in contrast to practise play

Prompt three: age wise keep it the same age range

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work.

I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

The Importance of Play

Object play refers to children's interaction with physical items to explore, manipulate and understand objects around them, promoting curiosity and inquisitiveness as they investigate how objects work, thus supporting exploration, discovery and communication (Play Wales, 2017). This suggests object play supports learning through direct experience. Smith and Pellegrini (2023) state that object play enables children to experiment with different actions, combinations without external limitations supporting problem-solving skills. This supports flexible thinking and confidence; however, this may depend on the level of support provided. Play Wales (2017) further highlights repeated handling of objects strengthens fine motor skills and hand eye coordination.

Whitebread *et al.*, (2023) state that object play begins when children can grasp and hold items, engaging in exploratory behaviours such as mouthing, turning, rubbing, hitting and dropping objects. This shows learning is sensory and based on trial and error; however, this perspective focuses mainly on individual exploration. Whitebread *et al.*, (2023) also describe this as sensorimotor play where children explore how materials feel and respond later organising objects between 18-24 months. This shows progression from exploration to classification. This aligns with Piaget's sensorimotor stage where children learn through active exploration and repeated interactions help them understand cause and effect (Lewis and Carpendale, 2023). This suggests learning is experience based; however social influence may also play a significant role.

Scott-McKie and Casey (2017) highlight object play involves hand-eye movements allowing exploration of different combinations. This supports flexible thinking and problem solving; however, not all children may engage with the same range of

movement due to individual differences. St. Martin's School (2025) states that activities such as blocks and puzzles promote cognitive development. This suggests structured play supports learning; however, it may be more adult directed than free exploration.

In contrast role play allows children to explore identity by adopting and exaggerating characteristics, imitating speech patterns, experimenting with roles and cultures (Play Scotland, 2025). This supports understanding of social roles through imagination; however, children's interpretations may not always accurately reflect real life behaviours. Play Wales (2017) states children draw on familiar, unfamiliar experiences but these are often adapted or exaggerated showing active interpretation rather than simple imitation.

Samis (2025) states that role play begins between ages two and three, supported by developing thinking and language skills. This shows cognitive and language development support imaginative play; however, developmental stages may vary between children. Samis (2025) also highlights that role play supports problem-solving, communication and coordination, showing it develops multiple areas simultaneously. Play Wales (2017) explains role play helps children explore perspective and understand others while recognising themselves as individuals supporting social awareness and identity development.

Bonilla-Sanchez *et al.*, (2022) state that role play supports learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) introduced by Vygotsky. This highlights the importance of social interaction in learning. McArdle (2024) explains that Vygotsky viewed learning as a social process supported by interactions with others, contrasting with Piaget's focus on independent learning. This shows both social and individual approaches contribute to development; however, the balance between them may depend on the context of learning.

Cambridge Assessment (2025) states that practitioners play a vital role in supporting children's learning by acting as facilitators rather than directing activities. This suggest that the practitioner's role is to facilitate opportunities allowing children to lead their own learning experiences; however, this may depend on the practitioner's ability to balance support with independence. For example, providing open-ended resources such as blocks, natural materials and everyday objects extend object play by encouraging creativity and problem solving (Play Wales, 2017). This is significant because open-ended resources allow children to explore different possibilities than being limited to a single outcome; nevertheless, some children may not engage with these resources in the same way. For role play practitioners create opportunities by providing props, costumes and real-life experiences that reflect children's interests (Play Scotland, 2025). This supports children in developing language, imagination and social understanding; however, some children may require additional support to fully engage in role play activities.

Both object, role play contributes to holistic development which refers to cognitive, social, emotional, physical and creative skills. The LEGO Foundation (as cited by Zosh *et al.*, 2025) identifies cognitive skills such as problem-solving and flexible thinking, social skills including communication and empathy, emotional skills involving self-regulation, physical skills through movement and coordination and creative skills through imagination and expression. This shows play supports multiple areas of development simultaneously; however, the extent of these benefits depends on the quality of the play environment.

Overall, both plays contribute to holistic development by supporting interconnected areas of learning. Play Wales (2017) and Cambridge Assessment (2025) highlight the importance of child led exploration supported by practitioner input, while Vygotsky's theory emphasises social interaction in learning. This shows children learn through exploration, interaction, experience; however, effective development is likely when approaches are balanced.

Self-Directed Play

Self-directed play refers to play that is initiated, controlled and directed by children rather than adults. Zaman and Khanom (as cited in UNICEF, 2022) explain free play allows children to explore, experiment, engage with activities without instructions or fixed outcomes, suggesting children learn through independence and exploration. Ledendecker (2020) further explains self-directed play encourages children to follow their own interests and curiosity, supporting intrinsic motivation and confidence. Highlighting that children become active participants in their learning; however, opportunities for self-directed play may depend on the environment and level of adult support available. Juster (2017) also explains that children often become deeply engaged in play because they are following their own thinking and imagination rather than adult expectations, suggesting that self-directed play supports meaningful and sustained learning experiences.

Self-directed play can include imaginative, outdoor, creative and construction activities where children choose how to engage with materials and others. Stallman (2023) states that child-directed play allows experimentation because there are no fixed outcomes, promoting creativity and flexible thinking; however, some children may need encouragement to engage confidently with open-ended resources. Furthermore, Zaman and Khanom (as cited in UNICEF, 2022) highlight free play enables discovery and exploration at an individual pace, supporting curiosity. Similarly, Moyles (2015) argues play provides opportunities for investigation and understanding through meaningful experiences. Aminpour *et al.*, (2020) further explain that outdoor environments containing flexible "in-between spaces" encourage self-directed exploration and imaginative play, suggesting that children benefit from environments that provide freedom and opportunities for independent discovery; however, access to well-designed outdoor environments depend on resources, practitioner support and

the setting itself. Ledendecker (2020) further states that self-directed play promotes independence as children make decisions and take ownership of experiences.

One key benefit is the development of confidence, independence and motivation. When children make choices, engagement increases because activities reflect personal interests. Edmentum (2024) explains that self-directed play develops problem-solving and critical thinking skills as children direct their own experiences. Bright Life Play School (2025) adds that child-led learning promotes deeper engagement through intrinsic motivation. McLean *et al.*, (2022) further explain that adults often associate play-based learning with creativity, exploration and active engagement, highlighting the importance of child-centred experiences, supporting the idea that learning becomes embedded when children are emotionally involved; however, engagement varies depending on individual interest. The Department for Education (2022) highlights that self-expression enables children to communicate ideas creatively, strengthening confidence and identity, showing learning becomes more meaningful when children are actively involved in decision-making.

Self-directed play also contributes to social, emotional and creative development. Zaman and Khanom (as cited in UNICEF, 2022) explain that free play builds resilience, emotional regulation and social understanding as children manage challenges independently. Juster (2017) notes children often use play to process experiences and express emotions in ways not always visible to adults, highlighting emotional learning within play; however, it may not always be easily recognised by practitioners. Stallman (2023) states child-led play encourages imagination by allowing experimentation with ideas and materials, promoting flexible thinking and creativity through open-ended exploration. Ledendecker (2020) also argues that removing adult direction allows children to develop curiosity and independent thinking skills.

Although self-directed, adult involvement remains important. Fiechtner and Albrecht (2019) explain that practitioners support by observing interests and extending learning without taking control, suggesting adults act as facilitators; however, balancing guidance and independence can be challenging. McInnes *et al.*, (2013) state the quality of adult-child interaction influences children's perceptions of play and their subsequent learning behaviours, highlighting sensitive adult involvement can positively influence engagement and learning outcomes; however, excessive adult direction may reduce opportunities for independence and child-led exploration. Stallman (2023) states adults should support opportunities for exploration while keeping children central to learning. Furthermore Rymanowicz (2015) adds adults enhance play by providing resources, encouragement and stimulating environments. Showing adult input strengthens learning without reducing autonomy.

Practitioners support self-directed play through open-ended resources, uninterrupted time and sensitive interaction. Moyles (2015) argues adults should not dominate play but support thinking and exploration. Similarly Sim and Xu (2025) suggest facilitated play can further extend understanding, showing that some adult guidance enhances

learning. Demonstrating a balance between child-led exploration and adult support strengthens outcomes. Moreover, the Department of Education (2022) highlights that well-planned environments encourage self-expression and independent thinking, having resources as blocks, natural materials, role-play props encourage creativity and problem-solving.

Overall, self-directed play contributes to holistic development, including cognitive, social, emotional and creative growth. Zaman and Khanom (as cited in UNICEF), Ledendecker (2020) and Edmentum (2024) highlight that independence, confidence and problem-solving are developed through child-led experiences. Moyles (2015) and Juster (2017) emphasise that meaningful learning occurs when children engage with their own interests. Although child-led, adult support remains essential in creating enabling environments and extending learning appropriately (Fiechtner and Albrecht, 2019; Rymanowicz, 2015). Showing effective practice requires balancing independence with sensitive adult involvement.

Observations

Observation is an important aspect of early years practice because it enables practitioners to understand children's development, interests and learning needs. Birth to 5 Matters (2021) explains that observation, assessment and planning are interconnected processes supporting practitioners in recognising children's progress and planning meaningful experiences, suggesting observations help practitioners gain a holistic understanding of learning; however, effectiveness may depend on the practitioner's ability to remain objective and reflective. Smidt (2015) further explains that observations allow practitioners to identify children's strengths, needs and patterns of behaviour within everyday experiences. Similarly, Bruce *et al.*, (2015) highlight that careful observation helps practitioners understand how children learn through play, interaction and exploration, demonstrating observations importance in child-centred practice.

One observation method commonly used within early years settings is the Running Record. Whitmore (2020) explains that a Running Record involves writing a detailed, continuous account of a child's behaviour, actions and interactions over a specific period, meaning practitioners record exactly what they see and hear without interpretation during observation itself. Unger *et al.*, (2025) further explain that Running Records were developed to support assessment and understanding of children's learning behaviours through systematic observation, suggesting that the method provides detailed information about children's development and engagement; however, the quality of the observation may depend on practitioner attention and recording skills. Brodie (2017) also highlights that effective observations should focus on significant learning and behaviour rather than every minor detail, demonstrating

that practitioners must balance detail with relevance when completing a Running Record.

Running Records are often carried out during child-initiated activities because they allow practitioners to observe children naturally within everyday experiences. Gökçe (2020) explains that observing children's play provides insight into communication, creativity, problem-solving and social interactions, suggesting that play-based observations help practitioners understand development in meaningful contexts. Bruce *et al.*, (2015) further explain that observations completed during play allow practitioners to identify children's interests and schemas, supporting responsive planning. Similarly, Birth to 5 Matters (2021) highlights that observations should focus on understanding children's learning journeys rather than simply measuring outcomes. This demonstrates that Running Records support a child-centred approach; however, practitioners may unintentionally influence behaviour if children become aware they are being observed.

One main strength of a Running Record is that it provides detailed information about children's behaviour and learning. Whitmore (2020) explains that Running Records allow practitioners to capture interactions, speech, body language and responses in real time, suggesting that practitioners gain a richer understanding of experiences compared to shorter observation methods. Riley-Ayers (2018) also states that detailed observations help practitioners make informed decisions about development and future learning opportunities. In addition, Smidt (2015) explains that detailed observations support reflective practice because practitioners can review actions and identify patterns over time, demonstrating that Running Records contribute to more effective planning and assessment; however, the method can be time-consuming while supervising other children within busy environments.

Another strength of Running Records is that they support formative assessment. Carnegie Mellon University (2019) explains that formative assessment involves ongoing assessment used to monitor progress and support future learning. This suggests Running Records help practitioners identify children's next steps through continuous observation rather than unnecessary testing. Similarly, Unger *et al.*, (2025) explain that Running Records provide evidence supporting understanding of literacy and communication development over time. This demonstrates Running Records are valuable in monitoring progress and informing practice; however, interpretations may vary between practitioners, potentially affecting reliability.

Although Running Records provide valuable information, there are also limitations to the method. Brodie (2017) explains practitioners may struggle to record observations objectively because assumptions or expectations can influence interpretations, highlighting the importance of remaining professional and reflective during the observation process. Gökçe (2020) further explains that observations only capture behaviour within a specific moment or context, meaning they may not always provide a complete picture of children's abilities, suggesting practitioners should use multiple

observations over time to gain a more accurate understanding of development. Furthermore, Bruce *et al.*, (2015) explain that ethical considerations such as confidentiality, consent and respectful practice are important when recording information about children. Consequently, practitioners must ensure observations are accurate, respectful and used appropriately to support learning and wellbeing.

Overall, the Running record is an effective observation method because it provides detailed insight into children's behaviour, learning and development within natural experiences. Whitmore (2020), Smidt (2015) and Riley-Ayers (2018) all highlight that detailed observations help practitioners understand children's interests, interactions and progress more effectively. In addition, Birth to 5 Matters (2021) and Bruce *et al.*, (2015) emphasise the importance of observations in supporting child-centred planning and responsive practice. Although Running Records can be time consuming and influenced by practitioner interpretation, they remain valuable in supporting formative assessment and understanding children's individual learning journeys (Carnegie Mellon University, 2019; Unger *et al.*, 2025). Therefore, effective use of Running Records contributes significantly to high-quality early years practice.

The role of play in observations

Play has central role in observation and assessment because it influences both children's engagement and the accuracy of observations. Howard and McInnes (2013) explain that when children perceive activities as play, they experience great emotional wellbeing and engagement. This suggests children are more likely to appear relaxed, motivated and focused during play-based observations, allowing practitioners to observe more authentic demonstrations of development. Moyles (2015) further explains that play enables children to explore ideas, test understanding and develop skills through active involvement. Similarly, Juster (2017) highlights that children become deeply absorbed in self-directed play because they are following their own interests and imagination rather than adult expectations. This demonstrates that play-based observations may provide practitioners with a more genuine understanding of children's abilities and behaviour; however, children's engagement may still vary depending on confidence, emotional wellbeing and familiarity with the environment.

A key question is whether observing children during play gives a more accurate reflection of development. MacRae and Jones (2020) explain that children's involvement and wellbeing are important indicators of meaningful learning, as highlighted within the Leuven Scale. High levels of involvement suggest that children are operating at the edge of their capabilities, making learning and development more visible to practitioners. Similarly, Gökçe, (2020) explains that observing children's play provides insight into communication, creativity problem-solving and social interaction. This suggests play allows children to demonstrate a wide range of skills naturally compared to adult-led activities where pressure or expectations may influence behaviour. Birth to 5 Matters (2021) also highlights that observations should focus on understanding

children's individual learning journeys rather than simply measuring outcomes, demonstrating that play-based observations may provide richer and more holistic information about development, however, interpretations may still vary between practitioners.

Although play can support more accurate observations, the quality of assessment still depends significantly on practitioner skill and professional judgement. Smidt (2015) explains that practitioners require strong knowledge of child development to interpret behaviour accurately and understand developmental differences between children. This suggests observations are more reliable when practitioners recognise developmental milestones, schemas and patterns of behaviour within play. Bruce *et al.*, (2015), further emphasise that observing children during everyday experiences allows practitioners to identify children's interests, learning behaviours and preferred ways of interacting. Knowing children well. Including their likes, interests and confidence levels, can therefore strengthen the accuracy of observations because practitioners are better able to recognise typical and atypical behaviour. However, Brodie (2017) explains that practitioners may unintentionally influence observations through assumptions or expectations, demonstrating the importance of remaining reflective and objective throughout the observation process.

Adults also play an important role in supporting meaningful engagement during play-based observations. Feichtner and Albrecht (2019) explain that practitioners should act as facilitators by observing carefully, extending learning sensitively and avoiding unnecessary control of activities. This supports the idea that adults should sometimes "stand back" to allow children's natural behaviour to emerge during play. McInnes *et al.*, (2013) further explain that adult-child interaction influences children's perceptions of play and subsequent learning behaviours. This suggests that excessive adult direction may reduce opportunities for authentic exploration and independent behaviour during observations. Rymanowicz (2015) also highlights that adults support children's play by providing encouragement, appropriate resources and stimulating experiences. Therefore, effective practitioner involvement requires balancing support with opportunities for independence.

The environment in which play takes place can also affect children's engagement and accuracy of observations. Eaton (2023) explains that enabling environments encourage children to explore, investigate and learn independently through accessible and stimulating resources. Similarly, Aminpour *et al.*, (2020) highlight that flexible indoor and outdoor spaces support self-directed exploration and imaginative play. Stallman (2023) further explains that child-directed play encourages experimentation because activities are not limited by fixed outcomes. This demonstrates that enabling environments may encourage children to engage more confidently and display a wider range of developmental behaviours during observations; however, opportunities for meaningful play may depend on practitioner support, available resources and the quality of the environment itself.

Overall, observing children during play can provide a more accurate reflection of development because children are often more engaged, confident and able to behave naturally within meaningful experiences. Howard and McInnes (2013), MacRae and Jones (2020) and Gökçe (2020) highlight that play supports emotional wellbeing, involvement and authentic engagement, helping practitioners gain deeper insight into children's learning and development. In addition, Smidt (2015) Fiechtner and Albrecht (2019) and Eaton (2023) emphasise that accurate observations depend on practitioner skill, knowledge of child development and enabling environments. Although play-based observations may still be influenced by interpretation and context, they remain valuable in supporting more holistic and child-centred assessment approaches.

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