

Total: 3149 words

Section 1

Play is a fundamental aspect of childhood that encompasses a wide range of activities, behaviors, and interactions. It is characterized by spontaneity, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation, serving as a primary mechanism through which children explore, learn, and make sense of the world around them. It transcends cultural boundaries and is recognized as essential for children's holistic development. Supporting and nurturing play promotes children's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development (Pellegrini, 2011).

Pellegrini (2011) notes that play encompasses over 100 different forms, including symbolic play, rough and tumble play, socio-dramatic play, social play, creative play, communication play, dramatic play, locomotor play, deep play, exploratory play, fantasy play, imaginative play, etc. It is inherently linked to curiosity, creativity, problem-solving, and experimentation. Play allows children to develop essential skills such as communication, collaboration, self-regulation, and empathy.

There are various forms of play, but there cannot be explored and discussed all in this portfolio section. This section, will focus more on imaginative play and locomotor play for reference and discussion.

Imaginative play also known as pretend play or make-believe play, involves children creating imaginary scenarios, taking on different roles, using objects symbolically, and acting out imaginary scenarios and stories. This type of play is characterized by creativity, spontaneity, and the suspension of reality. Engaging in imaginative play provides numerous benefits for children's holistic development across cognitive imagination and creativity, problem-solving skills, language development, social cooperation and collaboration, empathy, and perspective, social rules and norms, emotional expression, emotional regulation, resilience, and gross motor skills, fine motor skills (Singer, et. al., 2006).

Scenario example: a group of preschool children decides to play “doctor and patient” in the classroom’s pretend medical clinic corner.

Developmental benefits through imaginative play that children taking on roles as doctors, nurses, and patients, problem-solving medical issues, and using props as medical tools for their cognitive development. They cooperate to enact the scenario, communicating with each other about their roles and the “treatment” process to support their social skill and development. Children may express empathy for the “patients” and regulate their emotions as they act out various medical situations. Actions like bandaging examining, and moving around the play space promote their gross and fine motor skills (Doris,2002).

Locomotor play involves physical activities that require children to move their bodies through space. This type of play includes activities like running, jumping, hopping, skipping, and climbing, and plays a crucial role in promoting children’s holistic development across various domains, including cognitive-spatial awareness, problem-solving, social-cooperation and collaboration and leadership skills, self-confidence and emotional regulation, and gross motor skills and bone development (Pellegrini, 2011).

Scenario example: A group of children engages in a game of tag during outdoor recess, running, chasing, and dodging each other to avoid being tagged.

Pellegrini (2011) stated developmental benefits through locomotor play that children improve cardiovascular fitness, agility, and coordination when running, dodging, and jumping. Children strategize and plan their movements to evade or tag others enhancing cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills. The tag requires cooperation, communication, and turn-taking, fostering social interaction and positive peer relationships. Successfully avoiding being tagged or tagging others boosts children’s self-confidence and resilience, promoting positive emotional development.

Compare imaginative play and locomotor play with different aspects:

Comparatively, imaginative play fuels creativity and problem-solving as children invent scenarios and tackle challenges within their make-believe worlds. In contrast, locomotor play fosters spatial awareness and adaptive problem-solving skills as children navigate obstacles in physical space (Barnett, et. al., 2016). Socially, imaginative play cultivates cooperation, teamwork, empathy, and social understanding as children collaborate to sustain imaginary scenarios and understand different perspectives. Locomotor play facilitates teamwork and communication among children as they strategize and coordinate movements in group activities (Singer, 2006). Emotionally, imaginative play serves as a safe platform for emotional expression and resilience-building, while locomotor play bolsters self-confidence and perseverance through physical challenges (Singer, 2006). Physically, both forms of play contribute to gross and fine motor skill development, and physical fitness, with imaginative play emphasizing fine motor skills and locomotor play enhancing strength, coordination, and spatial awareness albeit through different activities and movements (Malina, 2004).

Both imaginative play and locomotor play are integral components of childhood development, offering unique benefits across cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains. While imaginative play promotes creativity, social interaction, and emotional expression, locomotor play focuses on physical activity, coordination, and teamwork. Supporting these play experiences is crucial for nurturing well-rounded individuals equipped with essential skills for life (Pellegrini, 2011).

In conclusion, Pellegrini (2011) emphasized play is a vital component of children's development, and supporting their play experiences is essential for fostering their overall well-being and learning. By understanding the different facets of play and implementing supportive strategies, educators and caregivers can create enriching environments that promote children's holistic growth and development. Provide diverse materials, toys, and resources that stimulate children's interests. Allow children to take the lead in play activities. Demonstrate positive play behaviours and ensure that play spaces and materials are accessible to all children.

Section 2

Importance of Children Choosing Their Own Play

Self-directed play, is where children independently initiate, lead, guide, and control their own play activities without adult intervention or direction. In self-directed play, children have the freedom to choose what, how, and with whom they play, allowing them to explore their interests, exercise creativity, and develop autonomy. This type of play is characterised by spontaneity exploration, and intrinsic motivation, as children engage in personally meaningful and enjoyable activities (Smith, et. al., 2023).

A study by Grolnick, et. al. (1989) found that children who have control over their play choices tend to develop a greater sense of autonomy and independence. They are more likely to take initiative and feel a sense of ownership over their play activities. This fosters a positive self-image and helps them develop decision-making skills from an early age (Deci, et. al., 2000). When children are given the freedom to choose their play activities, they are more intrinsically motivated. Intrinsic motivation leads to a deeper level of engagement and enjoyment in the play activity, promoting a love for learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The work of Diamond (2013) highlights that allowing children to make choices in their play contributes to the development of executive functions. Choosing and planning one's play activities require the use of executive functions such as working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility. Allowing children to make their play choices supports the development of these crucial cognitive skills that are essential for learning. Hidi, et. al., (2006) research emphasizes that when children are allowed to choose activities aligned with their interests, they exhibit higher levels of engagement. Allowing them to choose their play fosters a love for exploration and learning. This interest-driven engagement lays the foundation for a positive attitude towards learning. Howard, et. al., (2012) point out that children who have self-directed play will be more satisfied and fulfilled. Through children's self-directed play to promote well-being, happiness, and security.

The role of the adults in self-directed play

Research shows that enriched environments stimulate children's imagination, creativity, and cognitive development (Ginsburg, 2007). Adults can set up a play space with open-ended materials or loose parts like blocks, art supplies, and costumes, allowing children to explore and create freely in a safe, positive, and inclusive play space, ensuring that every child feels welcome and respected. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) emphasizes the role of adults in shaping the microsystem, including the immediate environment of the child. Provide additional materials or play activities and encourage children to explore and experiment with them independently to extend children's exploration, enhance learning opportunities, and foster their creativity, critical thinking, and a sense of curiosity (Bergen, 2018). Rogoff's sociocultural theory (1990) underscores the importance of adults in scaffolding children's learning during play. Studies by Gray (2011) indicate that allowing children ample time for uninterrupted play with adult direction or intervention can promote problem-solving skills, self-regulation, and social competence. When adults support children's autonomy, it promotes intrinsic motivation and engagement in play. Listening to children's interests and ideas, respecting their autonomy in selecting activities, and directing their play can support children's involvement and happiness through "Play" (Howard, et. al., 2012). In play, this involves offering emotional support, helping with problem-solving, and ensuring a secure environment for social and emotional development (Vygotsky, 1978). Create a safe and supportive atmosphere where children feel comfortable taking risks, expressing themselves, and engaging in imaginative play, which positive play environment enhances children's emotional well-being, social skills, and overall development (Ginsburg, 2007). Adults can observe and assess children's play to gain insights into their developmental progress (Epstein, 2014). After play sessions, engage children in conversations to reflect on their experiences, extend their learning, and encourage further exploration. This reflective discussion deepens children's understanding, promotes language development, and scaffolds their learning (Nicolopoulou, et. al., 2015). This information allows educators to tailor their support and provide activities that align with children's current abilities and emerging skills (Epstein, 2014). Adults can effectively support self-directed play, nurturing children's development and fostering a lifelong love for learning and exploration. Studies show

[PORTFOLIO]

that when adults take on a facilitative role in play, children demonstrate greater independence, problem-solving abilities, and social skills (Bergen, et. al., 2006). Howard, et. al., (2012) emphasize that continuing professional development for children's service professionals should the importance of play and the process of play.

In summary, allowing children to choose their own play, and free-flow play promotes autonomy, and intrinsic motivation, increasing their involvement, enhancing their behaviour and well-being, and the development of executive functions. Meanwhile, the role of adults is vital in providing support, facilitating learning opportunities, and creating a conducive environment for healthy social and emotional development. Which is closely aligned with the principles of the Early Years Foundation Stage, supporting child-led learning, personal development, and communication skills. By providing opportunities for children to initiate and guide their own play experiences, adults can create an enriching environment that promotes holistic development in the early years (Department for Education, 2021).

Section 3

Based on Department for Education (2021) observations in early years education involve systematically watching and documenting children's behaviours, interactions, and achievements. These observations help educators gain insights into a child's unique development progress, strengths, and areas that may require additional support. Through observations, educators can tailor their instructional strategies to meet the specific needs and interests of each child. Sharing observations with parents fosters collaboration between educators and families, creating a more holistic approach to a child's development. There are different several types of observations, in this portfolio will explore the running record in depth.

Running Record

The running record for early years children is a form of assessment used by educators to observe and document a child's behaviours and actions in a specific context and time frame. It involves continuous and objective recording, capturing both verbal and non-verbal behaviours. The observer selects a particular behaviour, interaction, or skill to focus on during the observation. This observation is recorded in a narrative format, detailing the child's actions, expressions, and interactions. It is typically done in real-time, capturing every significant aspect. The observer maintains objectivity, avoiding interpretations or judgments. The goal is to document what is observed rather than adding personal opinions which can cover a specific time period, such as 15 minutes of free play, or it can be more extensive, covering an entire play session (Gillett, et. al., 2017).

Researched by Gillett (2017), running records provide a wealth of descriptive data, allowing educators to gain insights into a child's interests, social interactions, problem-solving approaches, and language development. By observing a child's behaviour in a natural setting, educators can develop a holistic understanding of the child's strengths, challenges, and unique characteristics. The detailed information collected through running records informs the development of individualised plans for each child, addressing specific learning needs and promoting personalised learning experiences.

[PORTFOLIO]

Advantages of Running Record

Running records provide a personalised assessment of each child's abilities, allowing educators to tailor instruction to meet their specific needs. According to research by Clay (2002), educators can identify patterns in a child's behaviour and strategies which allows educators to customise instruction accordingly to meet their needs. Research by Schauble et. al., (2013), highlights the importance of real-time observation in understanding children's processes and guiding effective instructional practices. A study by Fuch, et. al., (1988) demonstrated that by frequent progress monitoring by running records, educators can track a child's progress and growth over time and adjust instruction as needed. By regularly administering running records, educators can monitor growth in children's holistic development. Shanahan and Barr (1995) highlighted that running records guide educators and inform instructional decisions by highlighting areas where a child may need additional support or instructional needs. Allington (1983) discussed how running records help educators tailor instruction to address the diverse learning needs of children, promoting more effective holistic development. Engaging in running assessments fosters closer educator-children relationships as educators gain a deeper understanding of children's behaviour and need (Pinnell, 1989).

Limitations of Running Record

While Running Record Observations offer valuable insights into children's development, they are not without limitations. Addressing these limitations requires careful attention to the factors explained below. Educators should be mindful of these limitations and supplement observational data with other assessment methods to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of children's needs and capabilities.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) emphasises the importance of using multiple assessment methods to capture the complexity of children's development beyond observable behaviours. Running records may not capture contextual factors affecting performance, such as background knowledge or motivation (Goodman, 1973). Pinnell (1989) noted that scoring discrepancies among different observers may affect the reliability and validity of running record assessments. Scoring errors and self-

[PORTFOLIO]

corrections in running records can be subjective and influenced by the observer's interpretation. Conducting and analysing running records for multiple students can be time-consuming, limiting their feasibility in busy settings which is a logistical challenge to implement within the constraints of time and resources (Allington, 1983). According to Shanahan et. al., (1995) running records provide a narrow view of thinking skills that may not assess all aspects such as inferential understanding or critical thinking.

Section 4

When observing and assessing children, play is critically important as it serves as a natural and developmentally appropriate context for learning and growth across various domains. Play engages children cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically, providing a comprehensive view of their abilities and holistic development. Observing children during play allows educators to assess multiple facets of their growth simultaneously. During imaginative play, a child not only demonstrates creativity and language skills but also problem-solving abilities, social interactions, and emotional regulation as they negotiate roles and scenarios with peers (Singer, et.al., 2006).

Play provides a naturalistic setting where children feel comfortable and are more likely to engage in authentic behaviours. Observing children in play allows educators to witness their spontaneous actions, interactions, and problem-solving strategies in contexts that are meaningful to them (Pellegrini, et. al., 1998). Play allows children to express their individuality, interests, and preferences. Through play, children engage in activities that reflect their unique personalities, cultural backgrounds, and experiences, providing valuable insights for assessment and planning. Singer. et. al.,(2006) conducted a longitudinal study examining the relationship between play and creativity in young children. The study found that children who engaged in imaginative play demonstrated higher levels of creativity and problem-solving skills over time. Ginsburg (2007) reviewed research on research on the benefits of play in promoting children's development and learning. The review highlighted the importance of play in fostering cognitive skills, social competence, and emotional well-being.

Scenario 1: During outdoor play, the educator observes two children engaging in a collaborative construction project using blocks. One child suggests stacking blocks to build a tower, while the other child proposes creating a bridge.

Through this observation, adults gain insights into the children's spatial reasoning, and communication skills. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasises the role of social interaction in cognitive development. Through collaborative play, children learn from one another and co-construct knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Offering suggestions or demonstrating different construction techniques can scaffold the children's learning and expand their understanding of spatial relationships and the importance of providing temporary support to facilitate children's learning and skill development (Bruner, 1985). Adults can encourage children to negotiate and find compromises when they have differing ideas or preferences fostering conflict-resolution skills (Rubin, et. al., 1983). After the play session, the adult can provide opportunities for further exploration and extension of their project during future play sessions to support continuity and deepen learning experiences. Reflection and discussion are integral parts of the learning process allowing children to consolidate their understanding and make connections to future learning (Dewey, 1938).

Scenario 2: During dramatic play, a child takes on the role of a doctor, interacting with peers and stuffed animals as patients.

Through this observation, the adults can assess the child's language development. Adults can engage in dialogue with the child, asking open-ended questions about their role as doctors and the needs of their patients to foster language development and expand the child's vocabulary (Lillard, et. al., 2013). Encouraging turn-taking, cooperation, and empathy towards peers fosters social skills and emotional development. Rubin, et.al. (1983) emphasise the importance of play in promoting social skills. Adults can pose challenges or scenarios that require the child to use problem-solving skills to understand roles and responsibilities. Encouraging the child to think critically about different scenarios and consider the needs of their patients enhances cognitive development (Bodrova, et. al., 2007). Adults can offer support and guidance as needed, providing suggestions or assistance in resolving conflicts or overcoming obstacles. Scaffolding and support from adults during play promote learning and skill development (Burner, 1985).

Scenario 3: During outdoor play, a child chooses to explore the natural environment, collecting leaves, rocks, and sticks to create an art project.

This observation reveals the child's curiosity, creativity, and connection to nature. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, children actively construct knowledge through exploration and interaction with their environment (Piaget, 1962). Adults can express interest in the child's exploration and encourage them to investigate different elements, providing opportunities for hands-on exploration and asking open-ended questions about the child's findings to foster curiosity and a sense of wonder. Adults can provide art materials and resources for the child to use in their art projects. Encouraging the child to experiment with different materials and techniques supports their creative expression and artistic development (Gardner, 1983). Connections between the child's outdoor exploration and broader concepts related to nature and the environment. Louv (2008) coined the term 'nature-deficit disorder' to describe the negative effects of a lack of nature exposure on children's physical and mental well-being. Encouraging outdoor exploration helps counteract these effects.

Overall, play is essential for observing and assessing children because it provides a naturalistic, comprehensive, and developmentally appropriate framework for understanding their abilities, interactions, and developmental progress. By incorporating play-based assessment approaches, educators can gain valuable insights into children's strengths, needs, and interests, informing individualized strategies and support interventions (Almon, 2015).

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