

Children's Play: Theory & Practice

Jack Benney

Student Number: 2104744

Word Count: 2,804

ECEY4003/C

Section 1

One type of play that is effective in the holistic development of a child is constructive play. Amin (2021) best describes constructive play as when a child uses toys, loose parts or materials to build or create something new. This type of play involves using many different types of skills such as, planning, drawing, assembling, moulding, cutting, stacking and testing skills. Wardle (2015) states that the best possible preparation to support constructive play is to allow adequate time each day for play, and continually changing, combining, and adding new and more complex materials for both indoors and on the playground. This helps to improve their decision making, critical thinking and inventiveness. Amin (2021) also believes that this type of play helps the holistic development of a child, stating that constructive play helps children make sense of the world whilst they develop problem solving skills, gross and fine motor skills, cognitive development, social skills, physical development and improve their fine motor development. The benefits of constructive play in relation to holistic development is that improves the Child's cognitive, physical, social and emotional wellbeing. These skills are more effectively learned outside of the classroom and are big impactors on future instances, for example speaking socially, studying and building relationships according to Wardle (2015) there are many different stages of constructive play with Arnerich (2021) stating that there is not a set way or an exact route through constructive play. The child is in control of what stage they are on during this type of play. Stages of constructive play include building, shaping, manipulating and bringing things together to try and create something new. ScienceDirect (2015) states that Vygotsky's theory on constructivism is that he believed individuals are active participants in the creation of their own knowledge.

MedicalCollegeOfWisconsin (2022) adds Vygotsky's believed learning is culturally dependant, with individuals from different cultures tend to learn in different ways.

Another type of play that is effective in the holistic development of a child is pretend play. Frank (2020) states that pretend play, also known as fantasy, play and socio-dramatic play, is the most prevalent type of play among young children. This type of play is closely associated with the development of the child's social, academic and cognitive abilities. Pretend play demands the use of the child's imagination, initiative and co-operation with others. It also encourages them to learn self-regulations to play the character they are portraying. The children who partake in pretend play are more likely to become less socially skilled and socially disruptive and are more likely to be socially connected to peers. There are many different stages of pretend play, developing into different types of pretend play as the child grows up and develops a better understanding and a more expansive imagination, allowing them to pretend play in a more in-depth way. The stages of pretend play are explained by Lovevery (n.d) who state that there are many different types and stages of pretend play.

Symbolic play starts around 18 to 24 months old, with the child using dolls and other objects to play. Dramatic play starts around 2 and a half to 3 years old, this is when children act out different scenarios like life around the house and pretending to be animals. Role play starts around 3 years old, children pretending to be members of their family like mum and dad, or a character from their favourite television show. Imaginary objects play starts around 3 to 4 years old, imaginary scenarios with imaginary props, for example a child may drink from a pretend cup. Pretend play with others start soon after in which they explore concepts like rules, roles and how to keep the play going when challenges arise. LumenLearning (n.d) states that Piaget believed that children pretend play helps them solidify new schemes they were developing cognitively. Piaget also believed that children also learn as they pretend and experiment, play does not only represent what they have learned. BusyBees (2020) states that Vygotsky recognised imaginative play as a leading factor in development. Hurst (2023) highlights the differences in Vygotsky's and Piaget's theories of pretend play. Vygotsky believed learning was acquired through language and social and cultural interactions, while Piaget believed though learning could be acquired through peer interactions, learning was acquired independently, and each child came to their own unique understanding. They both, however, share the same

belief that pretend play is a vital and necessary contributor to the development of the child according to keiki (2025).

Section 2

Self-directed play is best described by Play adventure (2019) as the concept of allowing children to play without influence of an adult and without the imposed framework, on their own, without adult interference. Self-directed play is freely chosen, determining and controlling the content and intent of their play. It is also personally directed by them following their own instincts, ideas and interests, allowing them to control the play and develop skills independently. Self-directed play is also defined as intrinsically motivated, playing in their own way for their own reasons. Theesteinerconnection (2022) states that self-directed play is guided and initiated by the child. The child is inspired by something like an object in their environment and begin to play with it. Self-directed play is different to playful learning as the learning is often marked as play. Edmentum (2024) explains how beneficial and impactful self-directed play can be. Self-directed play cultivates creativity and curiosity in children as they can interact directly and organically with their environment. Children can delve into their imagination thinking what could be instead of puzzling over what they have been told. Self-directed play fosters stronger social skills. This is because it provides children with unique opportunities to reflect on their experiences and work through different challenged, they may face during play. Play is described as a social activity, allowing children to get used to interacting with others and working through disagreements and collaborate. Shenfield (2023) adds to this by stating that unstructured group play helps them build empathy, improve their literacy and language skills by sharing ideas and having conversations, can reduce socially inappropriate behaviour by being succumbed to negative behaviours like selfishness and aggression It also helps the children to reduce anxiety and teaches them how to regulate their emotions by allowing them to have a safe space to explore and express their emotions, enabling them to learn and develop ways to regulate themselves and potentially understand how to help regulate other children.

According to Aurora (2022) adults can help to support children's self-directed play by being present and engaged in the play rather than leading and controlling the play.

The child should be the leader and instigator in the play. Adults can support the play by giving them an environment to express their interests, curiosities and independence. Smith (2024) states that adults can give the child the tools and environment to experience self-direct play. The impact of the adults helps in enabling children's self-direct play helps the child develop their social skills. It also builds the child's confidence, fosters their creativity and nurturing essential problem-solving abilities. Rymanowicz (2015) states that adult's role in self-direct play is to provide a choice for the child. Providing them the freedom to make their own decisions. Another role of the adult is to challenge a child's understanding and knowledge through opportunities to enable them to improve their development. Adults should be paying attention to environment and structure, when they base the environment on a child's strength, abilities and needs they can enhance their normal play to help them be successful and independent.

Ledendecker (2020) explains that self-directed is important as it helps to build a child's confidence by exploring on their own. This helps them realise there are many things they can do themselves. It also stimulates the child's imagination as they can't help but be creative during self-directed play, making their own stories up, solving their own problems and engaging in conversations that they improvise. Self-direct play also allows children to learn at their own pace, there is no timeline, no tests, no benchmarks to meet. They can build on their knowledge day after day in a way that best suits them individually. Self-direct play is also important as it can cultivate internal motivation. Children, without the adult to define success, tend to challenge themselves more and try different ideas and feel more accomplished and prouder of themselves. Play Action (2021) believe that self-direct play empowers children, and it gives them the opportunities to take control of their own actions. Play Action (2021) also believe that the children should be given time and have repeated opportunities to explore the same materials during self-direct play. This would enable them to think creatively and come up with new ways to play, promoting critical-thinking and problem solving. Gray (2013) believes that 'Unleashing' the children's instinct to play will make them happier, more self-reliant and better at understanding social queues and empathy.

Section 3

Observation in early years, as defined by Children first (2021) is the process of watching the children's development and learning. Observation is a way to find out the specific needs of an individual child without engaging with them and asking them directly. The adult can do this by watching, listening and noting anything noticeable or telling. Observation can help to make a child their own individual which is important when they are in a large group of other children. Observation can also help discover new abilities and skills that emerge during different situations like indoor play and outdoor play, or calm play and active play. Observation can be used to assess the individual child's progression. Allowing a chance to see if the specific care given to the child is beneficial or ineffective. According to Tuckova (2025) Montessori believed that observation allows understanding and understanding then allows meaningful assistance. There are different types of observation according to Children first (2021). One type of observation is participant observation, this is carried out when playing and working with the children. Another type of observation is recorded observation, this is when the observer writes down brief bits of information quickly and then carries on with the task or play that the child is doing. Spreeuwenberg (2022) states that it is important to use observations when with children as it is a useful way to better their understanding of a child's strengths and weaknesses, interests and progression throughout the academic year. Spreeuwenberg (2022) believes that there are 6 key reasons observing a child is beneficial. This is because the educator can better their understanding as to why a child might be having challenging behaviours, it can be used to identify special needs, it can be used to better the educators understanding of the child, it allows for the documentation of skills, it shows the unique way the individual children communicate and it allows the educator to see the way the children interact with other different children and adults. Gould (2024) explains the importance of observation by stating that through observation, teachers and educators can reflect and plan the environment and activities to create spaces that are appropriate and supportive of each child's needs, personalities and skills.

Time sample is an effective method of observation. Study.com (2023) defines time sample observation as a method of collecting data or information in which you watch an individual for a specific amount of time and record whether a particular behaviour

or activity took place. Gould (2024) gives an example of time sample observation in the classroom, stating teachers observe children at regular intervals, this allows them to gauge the level of engagement and see how they are responding to certain activities and conversations. An advantage of time sample observation is that the teacher does not need to be always attending to a student's behaviour, according to University of Kansas (2025). A disadvantage of time sampling observation, as given by Mann *et al.*, (1991), is that time sampling is inaccurate for estimating actual durations and frequency in behaviour, meaning there can be a difference in group behaviours. University of Kansas (2025) gives another example of the disadvantages of time sampling, stating that this measurement strategy is that it can underestimate a student's behaviour, meaning it cannot give a good estimate of the occurrence of a behaviour. Webster (2023) states that a holistic approach to observations ensure that no aspect of a child's development is overlooked. This promotes a well-rounded, balanced approach to learning and development that prepares children for future learning. Webster (2023) adds that observing their holistic development allows the practitioners to track a child's progress across multiple aspects of learning and development. Webster (2023) also states that by observing a child in various contexts and situations, practitioners can gain a holistic understanding of their development. The holistic approach to observations considers all aspects of a child's development, including cognitive, social, emotional and physical. This approach recognises that these elements are interconnected, and each are equally important for the child's development and wellbeing. Webster (2023) continues to state that a holistic approach to observations ensure that no aspect of a child's development is overlooked and less valued. This promotes a well-balanced approach to development and learning that prepares the child for the future.

Section 4

Observing and assessing children when they are playing is important as, according to Ette Tete (2025) it provides a safe space for a child to express themselves and understand their emotions. This allows the observer to gain an understanding of what a child is like when they are being themselves and expressing who they are. This could then lead to the observer gaining a better understanding of the child and

where they are in terms of their development compared to where they are projected to be. ChildCare.Gov (n.d) states that play allows children to build their confidence and resilience, this shows the observer what type of personality the child may have, potentially benefiting them when planning specific activities for the child to help them develop further. ChildCare.Gov (n.d) also believe that a child's development can be tracked by paying attention to how the child plays, behaves, learns and speaks as they grow. The child should be achieving different development milestones by a certain age. If the child is not achieving these age milestones it will become clear that they are behind on their development compared to others. BirthTo5Matters (n.d) states that each child is unique and while there is a guided estimation on where they should be in their development, progression is complex and different for each child. However, CDC (2024) states that if the child is not progressing at the rate they are expected then a specialist may observe the child and give an evaluation. This would determine whether the child would need special treatment or early intervention services or even both. Rymanowicz (2015) states that adults can support during play by simply engaging with the children whilst they are playing, by being involved, children will learn that adults are invested in them and are also showing them a level of respect. Participating in play shows the child that the adult values what they are doing. Adults can also support children's play by carefully adding to the play. This can be done by modelling positive behaviours and interactions. Adults can also intervene if a situation arises where the child may need help. However, it is important to remember that children need to be challenged for them to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. According to McInnes *et al.*, (2011) believe that when adults get involved in play activities without an understanding and valuing play, they tend to focus on managing and monitoring children rather than supporting their play and developing. McInnes also believes that the adult's role is to facilitate and support children's play. This can be done by setting up and giving them an enabling environment so they can use different skills, like critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and develop them in an individualistic way. FirstDiscoverers (n.d) states that Howard Gardner believed that children are likely to have different preferred ways of learning, one child may prefer verbal explanation while another may prefer to follow pictures or diagrams. Gardner believed it is the role of an adult to help a child develop by giving each child their own preferred platform to develop, give them all a desired way to learn to maintain their development progression. Gardner's theory

differs from McInnes as Gardner believed the adult should give each individual child their preferred way of learning whilst McInnes believed the adult should give all children an enabling environment to develop. This clashes with Gardner's theory as the enabling environment McInnes suggests would be the same for all children, regardless of if it is the best and preferred way a child would want to learn.

Reference List

Amin, R. (2021) *The Benefits of constructive play in early years children!* Available at: <https://www.pentagonplay.co.uk/news-and-info/benefits-of-construction-play#:~:text=Constructive%20play%20occurs%20when%20children,%2C%20moulding%2C%20stacking%20and%20testing> (Accessed: 12 Feb 2025).

Arnerich, M. (2021) *Constructive play: what is it and how do we encourage it?* Available at: [https://www.famly.co/blog/encouraging-constructive-play#:~:text=Constructive%20play%20\(or%20construction%20play,whole%20host%20of%20new%20ones](https://www.famly.co/blog/encouraging-constructive-play#:~:text=Constructive%20play%20(or%20construction%20play,whole%20host%20of%20new%20ones) (Accessed: 12 Feb 2025).

Aurora (2022) *Leading vs supporting – Adult's role in child play.* Available at: <https://auroraearlyeducation.com.au/leading-vs-supporting-adults-role-in-child-play/#:~:text=However%2C%20it's%20important%20for%20an,self%2Ddirected%20by%20the%20child> (Accessed: 13 Feb 2025).

BirthTo5Matters (n.d) *Child development.* Available at: <https://birthto5matters.org.uk/child-development/> (Accessed: 15 Feb 2025)

BusyBees (2020) *Why imaginative play is important for your child's development.* Available at: <https://www.busybees.edu.au/why-imaginative-play-is-important-for-your-childs-development/#:~:text=Celebrated%20Russian%20Psychologist%2C%20Lev%20Vygotzky,and%20believed%20imagination%20created%20action> (Accessed: 12 Feb 2025).

CDC (2024) *Developmental Screening.* Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/screening.html#:~:text=The%20specialist%20may%20observe%20the,early%20intervention%20services%20or%20both> (Accessed: 15 Feb 2025).

ChildCare.Gov (n.d) *Why is playtime important?* Available at: <https://www.childcare.gov/consumer-education/childrens-learning-through-play#:~:text=Many%20social%20and%20emotional%20skills,self%2Desteem%2C%20and%20resilience> (Accessed: 15 Feb 2025).

Children first (2021) *Effective practice: Observation, Assessment and planning*.

Available at:

https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/media/5555/effective_poa_and_planning.pdf

(Accessed: 14 Feb 2025).

Edmentum (2024) *How self-directed play helps your children learn*. Available at:

<https://www.edmentum.com/intl/articles/self-directed-play/> (Accessed: 13 Feb 2025).

Ette Tete (2025) *The power of role playing: Unleashing your child's development potential*. Available at:

<https://ettetete.com/blogs/news/the-power-of-role-playing-unleashing-your-child-s-development-potential#:~:text=Role%20playing%20provides%20a%20safe,with%20their%20play%20mates%20or%20siblings> (Accessed: 15 Feb 2025).

FirstDiscoverers (n.d) *Child development theories: Howard Gardner*. Available at:

<https://www.firstdiscoverers.co.uk/howard-gardner-child-development-theories/>

(Accessed: 15 Feb 2025).

Frank, N. (2020) *Five types of play to develop your child holistically*. Available at:

<https://www.cotlands.org/five-types-of-play-to-develop-your-child-holistically/>

(Accessed: 12 Feb 2025).

Gould, R. (2024) *Observation techniques in early childhood education that matter*.

Available at: <https://www.amu.apus.edu/area-of-study/education/resources/observation-techniques-in-early-childhood-education-that-matter/#:~:text=Through%20observing%2C%20reflecting%2C%20and%20planning,of%20their%20child's%20academic%20journey> (Accessed: 14 Feb 2025).

Gray, P. (2013) *The evolutionary importance of self-directed play*. Available at:

<https://www.thegeniusofplay.org/genius/expert-advice/articles/the-evolutionary-importance-of-self-directed-play.aspx> (Accessed: 13 Feb 2025).

Hurst, M. (2023) *Piaget Vs. Vygotsky | Theory, similarities & differences*. Available

at: <https://study.com/learn/lesson/piaget-vs-vygotsky-theories-differences-purpose.html#:~:text=Some%20differences%20between%20Piaget%20and,came%20to%20their%20own%20understanding> (Accessed: 12 Feb 2025).

Keiki (2025) *The importance of role play in a child's life*. Available at: <https://keikiearlylearning.com.au/the-importance-of-role-play-in-a-childs-life/#:~:text=Several%20theorists%20such%20as%20Lev,the%20development%20of%20a%20child> (Accessed: 12 Feb 2025).

Ledendecker, M. (2020) *Why encourage self-directed play?* Available at: <https://www.berkshiremontessori.org/msb-blog/self-directed-play> (Accessed: 13 Feb 2025).

Lovevery (n.d) *Pretend Play*. Available at: <https://blog.lovevery.com/skills-stages/pretend-play/> (Accessed: 12 Feb 2025).

LumenLearning (n.d) *Piaget's pretend play*. Available at: <https://bookdown.org/nathalieyuen/understanding-the-whole-child/piagets-preoperational-intelligence.html> (Accessed: 12 Feb 2025).

Mann, J. Ten Have, T. Plunkett, JW and Meisels, SJ. (1991) *Time sampling: a methodological critique*. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/2055121/#:~:text=By%20contrasting%20time%20sampling%20to,or%20continuous%20sampling%20is%20used> (Accessed: 14 Feb 2025).

McInnes, K. Howard, JL. Miles, G and Crowley, K. (2011) *Differences in practitioners' understanding of play and how this influences pedagogy and children's perceptions of play*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233288198_Differences_in_practitioners'_understanding_of_play_and_how_this_influences_pedagogy_and_children's_perceptions_of_play (Accessed: 15 Feb 2025).

MedicalCollegeOfWisconsin (2022) *Sociocultural theory of cognitive development*. Available at: <https://www.mcw.edu/-/media/MCW/Education/Academic-Affairs/OEI/Faculty-Quick-Guides/Sociocultural-Theory-of-Cognitive-Development.pdf> (Accessed: 12 Feb 2025).

Play Action (2021) *The importance of child-directed play*. Available at: <https://playactioninternational.org/the-importance-of-child-directed-play/> (Accessed: 13 Feb 2025).

Play Adventures (2019) *Self-directed play*. Available at: <https://www.playadventures.org/self-directed-play#:~:text=Self%20Directed%20Play%20is%20the,intent%20of%20their%20play%E2%80%8B> (Accessed: 13 Feb 2025).

Rymanowicz, K. (2015) *The power of play – Part 5: Adult roles in child's play*. Available at: https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/the_power_of_play_part_5_adult_roles_in_childs_play (Accessed: 13 Feb 2025).

ScienceDirect (2015) *Social Constructivism*. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/social-constructivism#:~:text=Social%20constructivism%2C%20a%20social%20learning,Sc hreiber%20%26%20Valle%2C%202013> (Accessed: 12 Feb 2025).

Shenfield, T. (2023) *The importance of play in social skills development*. Available at: <https://www.psy-ed.com/wpblog/play-and-social-skills-development/> (Accessed: 13 Feb 2025).

Smith, K. (2024) *How can adults support play?* Available at: <https://sensoryproject.org/2024/11/18/how-can-adults-support-play/> (Accessed: 13 Feb 2025).

Speeuwenberg, R. (2022) *The importance of observation in early childhood education*. Available at: <https://www.lillio.com/blog/assessing-toddler-development-through-observation> (Accessed: 14 Feb 2025).

Study.com (2023) *Time Sampling | Overview, methods & examples*. Available at: <https://study.com/learn/lesson/time-sampling-concept-examples.html#:~:text=Time%20sampling%20is%20a%20method,each%20day%20for%20a%20month> (Accessed: 14 Feb 2025).

Thesteinerconnection (2022) *Self-directed play in the Waldorf kindergarten*. Available at: <https://thesteinerconnection.com/2022/07/01/self-directed-play#:~:text=Self%2Ddirected%20play%20is%20guided,is%20often%20masked%20as%20play> (Accessed: 13 Feb 2025).

Tuckova, M. (2025) *Observation*. Available at:

<https://montessoriparenting.org/observation/#:~:text=Observation%20allows%20understanding%2C%20and%20understanding,for%20what%20it%20really%20is>

(Accessed: 14 Feb 2025).

University of Kansas (2025) *Momentary time sample recording*. Available at:

https://specialconnections.ku.edu/assessment/data_based_decision_making/teacher_tools/momentary_time_sample_recording/#:~:text=A%20major%20advantage%20of%20the,easy%20to%20implement%20in%20class (Accessed: 14 Feb 2025).

Wardle, F. (2015) *The importance of constructive play*. Available at:

<https://www.communityplaythings.co.uk/learning-library/articles/constructive-play#:~:text=This%2C%20many%20believe%2C%20is%20the,ways%20to%20support%20constructive%20play> (Accessed: 12 Feb 2025).

Webster, C. (2023) A positive approach to observations. Available at:

<https://connectchildcare.com/blog/a-positive-approach-to-observations/#:~:text=Holistic%20observations%20also%20allow%20practitioners,a%20child's%20development%20is%20overlooked> (Accessed: 14 Feb 2025).