

Children's Play: Theory and Practice

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Section 1

Play is seen to be as one of the most fundamental and beneficial ways for a young child to develop holistically. It allows children to explore their knowledge and understanding through the basis of play. According to Birth to 5 Matters, play for a young child is essential and has even been included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child. The word play can be described in numerous different terms. The key words that are related are known as, fun, freedom, engaging and creative. Just based off of those key words, developmental skills can be seen to be being used. Children themselves have professed how play benefits them. Two popular play activities being playing with Lego and jigsaw puzzles. These allow the children to be creative, benefiting their creative skills and also their social skills (Tietoy, 2014).

To gain a better understanding of play, this section of the essay will go on to describe the different types of play. It will explain their contents, benefits and provide examples. The more well-known different types of play are physical, social and creative.

Physical play can be simple activities such as catch and tag. Physical play is all based on the movements of a child, whether that be running, walking or dancing. This type of play will increasingly become more active and concentrated in the different stages of a child's life. In the earliest stage an example of physical play could be playing in and/or with water. As the child grows, and their brain continues to develop, the activities may change to completing an obstacle course, successfully climbing a frame and skipping. All of these activities are aimed to use a child's gross motor skills. In the toddler stage of life, children are intrigued by the world around them. It is when they are their most curious which then leads them to explore and discover through play. Despite physical play benefiting a child's brain development and numerous skills, it also comes with many physical benefits. These benefits include strong bones and muscles, balance, co-ordination, healthy weight and develops fine and gross motor skills, (The Sector, 2022). Not only does physical play support physical health and growth but it also supports and young child's well-being. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a child's well-being is seen as a key feature for a child to develop holistically. Physical play can help build confidence and self-esteem. Self-esteem is one of the five mentioned in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Each of the five components mentioned in his pyramid are dedicated to a child's holistic development. Physical play also helps with building friendships with others, whether that may be the fellow children or the practitioners. It also focuses on a child's cognitive development, (The Sector, 2022). The brain develops the most in

the earliest stages of life, this means that all skills learnt at a young age are the ones that will be taken and improved upon in the later stage of life.

Similar to physical play, social play will look different for an infant compared to a toddler. An example of social play for an infant can be as easy as peek-a-boo. As an infant will not be able to communicate adequately with language, they can communicate through facial expressions and sound, such as smiling and cooing. An activity as easy as peek-a-boo allows the child to communicate through this way. As children enter their toddler stage they will start to play and be encouraged to play socially. This can be done through games such as, Simon says as this activity can only be successful in a group. Fantasy play and creative play can also come hand in hand with social play. Another example of social play can be problem solving. Social play can come with numerous benefits for a young child. These being improvement of social skills, build-up of confidence, building friendships and learning with others. Social skills are one of the most important aspects of an adult's life. How a child perceives social situations, they will go on to take into their adult lives. Linking it back to Maslow, social play is another fundamental and key factor in a child's holistic development.

Mildred Parten Newhall's theory of play helped to gain a new perspective on children's play. Her theory is made up of six stages of play. These six stages being, unoccupied, solitary, onlooker, parallel, associate and cooperative. She believed that as a child grew, they went through each of these stages going from, "less to more socially engaged" forms of play, (Early Years TV, no date). Despite Parten's theory being widely praised, it has also come with criticisms. For example, Parten's original study was said to be carried out with 42 children which has led some to believe that it was very limited. Some critics also believe that as the observations were made in a matter of minutes that some key information was missed by doing so. Despite the criticisms Parten's theory has gone on to mould how play is now observed with young children.

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Section 2

Self-directed play is described as “freely chosen”. It is the concept of children independently and freely choosing their own play, without interference from an adult, (Play Adventures, 2019). An example of self-directed play is “loose parts”. This type of play encourages invention, independence, problem-solving and socialising which are all seen as essential for young children. Self-directed play can be said to build a child’s confidence. By being independent, children learn for themselves. This means they are more able to develop quicker and learn more efficiently. It encourages and teaches problem solving. Since the child will be making the rules and determining the outcome it is more than likely that problems will occur. As they will be in charge, it will then be their job to solve any issues that come up. For example, the child wants to paint but they are missing the one colour they need. This will then give the child the opportunity to solve the issue by either going to find that one colour that they need or deciding to substitute the colour for the most similar colour. They could also use this issue to develop their creative skills as they will need to imagine a different outcome for the painting. Self-directed play allows children to “learn at their own pace”, (The Montessori School, 2020). Each child is unique and different in their own ways. This means that it is highly likely that most children all learn or prefer to learn in their own ways. However, for young children, they learn the most efficient through actions, for example, play. For an example, a child that is non-verbal may find it best to communicate and learn through actions. It may make more sense and feel more familiar to them, allowing them to feel more comfortable in their learning. Self-directed play also encourages motivation in young children. As the children will be independently choosing their own activity, it is likely that they will choose something new that they have never chosen before. This can lead to the feeling of joy and accomplishment which can also link to self-esteem. As said in section 1, self-esteem makes up one of the five components in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.

The role of the adult during self-directed play is essential for the children’s learning and understanding. This is because young children pick up on everything and how they perceive things can go on to determine how they feel about the activity. By the adult supporting a child’s play it can help them to familiarise themselves with the children’s interests. It can also help the adult to observe and learn about how the children play. For example, during self-directed play, if a child has decided to do an activity on their own instead of with others this may incline to the adult that that child may prefer playing independently. Engaging in a child’s play is also seen as a way of supporting self-directed play. By participating freely, it can allow the child to feel comfortable enough to create an emotional bond with the adult. Other ways that the adult can support a child’s play are to, facilitate, observe and provide freedom to explore. By allowing the children freedom they will be more likely to show their true

interests and improve upon their independence. Another way for the adult to support the children during self-directed play is to encourage conversations. For example, if the child needs help or wants someone else to join in with their activity, they will know to communicate with others in order to achieve their goal. This can also benefit communication skills. This will create a knowledge of understanding for the children.

Self-directed play is seen as a beneficial way for a child's holistic development. It improves and encourages social skills, creative thinking and cognitive skills. It encourages experimentation and exploration. When children play with others it allows them to learn the skills such as patience, negotiation and to share. Despite self-directed play being a benefit to holistic development, it is considered important as it brings the children joy and happiness. All skills learnt in a young child's life and during self-directed play will be adapted into their adult life.

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Section 3

According to West Sussex County Council, the definition of observation is the “process of watching the children in our care”. This can be done in numerous different ways. It is taking note of what has been seen and heard. These notes can also be recorded in numerous ways. Some of the most popular observation methods are narrative, time tracker, photographic and video, interaction tracker and rating scales. These records are made up of detailed information that can be used at a later date. Observations are seen as ways for the practitioners to learn more about the child. Their likes and dislikes, how they perceive the space around them and to provide new learning opportunities for the children, (Building Blocks, 2022). Adults are perceived as role models for children and are the ones responsible in making sure that the children hit certain learning milestones. Observations are used during this time as a way to keep track of these milestones and to keep the information to look back on when needed.

Observations are seen as important because it is one of the most effective ways for an adult to truly see how a child behaves. During activities such as self-directed play, the practitioner will have the role of observing the children. This will give them the insight of how the children play and socialise with others. As well as observation records showing evidence of a child’s achievements, it also shows and reminds the practitioner as to how they got the child to achieve those milestones. Planning lesson activities will become clearer for the practitioner as they will know what does and does not work for certain children based on the notes recorded. The holistic development of a child is a top priority and by recording observations, these developments can be tracked and traced. Skills such as cognitive, physical, social and emotional can all be recorded and noted when using the observation method.

An example of an observation which is used is the method called, photographic and video observation. This observation is carried out by using a camera to take photos and videos in order to record information. Despite this method coming with advantages, it also comes with disadvantages. One benefit of this observation tool is how by taking visual evidence, it can demonstrate and show certain details and “capture moments” that can be challenging to describe with words, (Connect Childcare, 2024). Another benefit involves the parents/carers. By taking photos and videos, the parents/carers are able to see their children achieving goals and having fun. It brings their work to life which can be a joy for the parents/carers. A key benefit is how this method can be used to reflect with the children. Children who may struggle to read would benefit more from looking at photos and videos. Not only

will this encourage them to reflect and learn but also to communicate with others. This method is seen as a successful way to reflect for the educator as it is easy to go back and look at the images when needed, (The Digital Early Childhood Educator, 2024).

On the other hand, this observation method does also have limitations. According to the NSPCC, schools should have a recorded policy when it corresponds with taking photos and videos of children. All staff and adults should be aware of this policy, (NSPCC Learning, 2024). A further limitation can be how a photo can only record one moment in time and can show very little information. Compared to other observation methods such as narrative observation which can show and analyse all details of information, videos, and especially photos, lack the details needed to be recorded. As well as this, photos can be faked. For example, most children will do as their told. When they have a camera in front of them and are then told to smile, it is highly likely that that child will smile for that photograph. This then make the information shown in the photo untrue. One considerable disadvantage can be the lack of parent/carer consent. Not all parents will agree to having photos and videos of their child taken. It can be regarded as a safeguarding issue, linking back to the NSPCC policy. By not having the consent from the parent it would make this observation method impossible to complete, (University of Plymouth, no date). When relating to the child's holistic development, photographic and video evidence would not show all of the information needed. It can indicate at what skills the child is using, for example, social, emotional, cognitive or physical, but it may not show in what degree they are using and benefiting from it. Narrative observation may be seen as more benefitting when associated with the children's holistic development and the recorded information of their milestones and achievements that include that detail.

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Section 4

Play is seen as one of the most fundamental and beneficial methods when associated with observation. When a child is playing, it gives the adult the opportunity to see how a child truly interacts with others and develops. It reveals their thoughts and feelings. Not only this but it can also show the practitioner their abilities such as physical, cognitive, social and emotional. By observing a child through play activities, it allows the educator to seek out the child's strengths and weaknesses. The information gathered from these observations can then go on to be given to the parents/carers, giving them the opportunity to be involved (Froebel Trust, no date). Play is a way to understand and learn about someone's personality. By letting children play, the adult is able to see how the children react to independence, socialising with others and confidence.

It can be argued that play is one of the best forms of recording information for observation. Play is a form of freedom for young children. When carrying out the activity of play, a child is able to act upon their own thoughts and feelings, the environment around them and the people around them. The question does play give a more accurate reflection of a child's development compared to other methods is challenging to answer. The argument that play does give a more accurate view of a child and their development can be based on the fact that play is free. A child is free to express themselves. For example, observing a child during play gives the practitioner information such as, patterns in behaviour, monitoring of engagement, social development and language development. Play is an "authentic expression" of a child, (The Voice of Early Childhood, 2023). Despite all of the advantages mentioned, observation during play can come with limitations which could lead someone to believe that play does not give an accurate representation of a child and their development. These can be, limited context, short observation periods, disruption to natural behaviour and difficulty tracking multiple children. A child may notice when they are being observed. This would then cause the child to act differently as they know they are being watched. That would then lead to the information being recorded to be false. It would be difficult to track certain developmental aspects of a child if they were to act differently when being observed. When having a room full of children, it can be considerably challenging to observe multiple children at once. This could then lead to misplaced information or even lack of information all together.

Adults have the role of supporting children during play. This can be done by providing a safe environment. During self-directed play, children will have the opportunity to choose their activity independently. By ensuring that the space around them is safe beforehand, it can allow to educator more time to focus on recording on the observation, (Care Learning, 2024). Another way an adult can support this is by

standing back and allowing the children to learn on their own. By doing this the child will learn to become more comfortable when having to be independent. They will learn and use other skills such as problem solving when necessary. They would also use skills such as communication and social skills as they would have the opportunity to play freely. For example, if a child wants another child to play with them, they will have to communicate with that child in order to reach their goal. On the other hand, by standing back the educator will also be able to see what developmental skills are weaker for certain children and need to be focused on. The skill of communication could also be used in this example. The practitioner will be able to recognise if a child is struggling with communicating with others. Practitioners and other adults can simply check in with children during play. This not only gives the adult the opportunity to communicate with the children, but it also demonstrates to the children that you are invested in them. This can lead to an emotional bond being made between the adult and child, (Play Like Mum, 2023). One key way for an adult to support play and a child's development is by involving the parents. This can be done depending on how the observation has been recorded. For example, showing the parents photos and videos or sharing information that has been written during a narrative observation. Not only will this benefit the child, but it will also make the parents feel more involved. By sharing this information with the parent, it can benefit the child because the parents can then take that information and use it at home. For example, if a child is struggling with language development the parents can take that information to create activities at home to help the child reach that milestone.

Play is one of the most beneficial forms of recording for observations. This is because it allows the children to act upon their wishes and be free. It is also because play gives the practitioner the opportunity to watch and learn more about the children's personality.

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