

Portfolio

Section 1

‘Play’ can be identified by adults through recognising the characteristics of children playing, yet it is still difficult to find a single definition for it (Brown and Patte, 2012, p. 3). However, Play Therapy (2017) defines play as a leisure activity where children use their physical and cognitive skills for enjoyment purposes only with no aim or objective. UNICEF (2018) agrees with Brown and Patte (2012, p.3) that defining play is hard, but acknowledges there are key features most often associated with the activity. They support this by stating that play is important because it is enjoyable and therefore engaging for children to feel like they want to learn. They further state that it is purposeful and therefore allows children to develop their social and emotional skills with others and finally, UNICEF (2018) also says play is an open activity as it can be created from anything. This helps children develop other essential skills such as their cognitive and physical development through problem solving and movement. Children also face challenges through different play types, all of which result in vital learning experiences and holistic growth. In Wales in 2012, the importance of a child’s rights to play was recognized by the Welsh Government. As a result, Wales became the first country in the world to bring children’s right to play and the importance of play opportunities into legislation with the Play Sufficiency Duty law (Tawil and Barclay, 2020).

There are many different types of play children can engage in. Pathways (2020) supports this by exploring various types of play, for example messy play (using their hands to play with materials like water, paint or flour) and associate play (where children begin to interact with others during play). Another play type is self-directed play, which allows children to use their own individual initiatives to direct their own play environments. This means there is no adult interference involved (Play Adventures, 2019). The role of self-directed play is to allow children to explore their abilities, the environment, and resources. It also supports building skills and learning on their own using their imaginations. Hollis Montessori School (2018) says that children who have access to self-directed play opportunities created by adults will be able to build on their self-confidence, which will result in a positive, can-do attitude towards learning. Further to this, children who engage in self-directed play will feel as though it is fun as they are not being told what to do by an adult. Pound (2006, p. 73) agrees by stating ‘children

are naturally drawn to play experiences and concentrate for longer periods in their self-chosen play’.

Symbolic play is another play type that can support self-directed play. Lewis (2020) explains that symbolic play happens when a child uses an object and pretends it is something else. For example, they might use a banana as a telephone, or even a building block as a mobile phone. By being creative with their imagination, it could be argued that children are engaging in self-directed play through symbolic play, as they are using their own ideas to create new possibilities. As a result, Lewis (2020) supports the idea that children develop their cognitive skills through imagination, but also their language development and motor skills.

The many different types of play are important for children because it allows them to develop socially, emotionally cognitively and physically and is therefore a crucial way for children to develop holistically (Play England, 2020). NiDirect (2020) further supports the idea that play aids holistic development by saying that play improves the cognitive, social and emotional well-being of all children and it is through play that children learn about the world and themselves. Play England (2020) further acknowledges that the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child ‘adopted a comment’ on Article 31 in February 2013. This aimed to emphasize to all governments the importance of a child’s right to relax and play, but also the importance of its holistic development value for children.

Adults can support self-directed play for children in several ways. Rymanowicz (2015) states that adults can adapt the environment that children play in to support a variety of developmental opportunities and self-directed play. For example, this could be organising different stations within the classroom and in the playground. Another idea could be creating an area for arts and crafts to help develop fine motor skills and another area for children to engage in role play, resulting in developing social and language skills with other children. Furthermore, there could be a climbing area in the playground to help support physical development and coordination. Also, providing an area outside for sand and water play will help with aiding sensory development. Learning Through Landscapes (2013) agrees with Rymanowicz (2015) by stating that adults should provide an environment with lots of play possibilities. Therefore, adults are supporting self-directed play by allowing children the freedom of choosing what they would like to play with, where they would like to play and with who.

Section 2

Exposing children to risks during play is an important part of a child's development and growth (Rodgers, 2018). Rigby (2019) defines 'risk' as something that has an unknown outcome, which could either be negative or positive. According to Blincoe (2015), risky play could include rough and tumble play, it could involve challenging heights or speeds and it is essential to children having access to a healthy childhood and building their strength and resilience. Adults take risks in their everyday lives and as a result they subconsciously assess if the benefits outweigh the negatives before they proceed with said risk, no matter how great or small. Rigby (2019) goes on to support the idea that adults make internal risk assessments, which is a skill that children will need to develop to thrive throughout the course of life.

Rodgers (2018) suggests that engaging in risky play allows children to tackle challenges that may be scary but exciting for the child. By challenging themselves, children are developing their physical skills as they might decide to climb just that little bit higher or run that little bit faster. They can develop emotionally by learning to take control of their feelings. For example, they will learn to overcome any fears they may have as they are facing the unknown by taking risks. Finally, Rodgers (2018) further states that children will be developing cognitively during risky play due to exercising thinking skills and problem solving, but also, they will begin to understand the boundaries of the environment and of those around them. Blincoe (2018) agrees by suggesting that exposing children to 'healthy risk' allows them to encounter fear, however she states that parents of today are unfamiliar in allowing their children to experience any risks due to fears of their own. Blincoe (2018) supports this by saying that the distance children play away from home in today's society has decreased by 90% over the last 30 years.

Play Scotland (2021) supports the idea that allowing children to engage in risky play is beneficial and agrees with Rodgers (2018) by stating that risky play helps children develop physically, socially and mentally. They also add that it brings other benefits to children's development such as giving them confidence and building their self-esteem, which ultimately creates a 'can do' attitude within children to always have a go at new things. Play Scotland (2021) also suggests that children consider risky play to be fun and exciting, therefore this mindset supports their curiosity to investigate things. This could be playing in a new area of the playground with new resources or even deciding to slide down a slide on their belly instead of sitting down. From this research, exposing children to risky play is healthy and holistically

beneficial as it supports many areas of development in early childhood, but also helps children overcome any irrational fears, allowing them to progress into adulthood without those fears (Sandseter and Kennair, 2011).

Manners (2019) suggests that the difference between a 'hazard' and a 'risk' is that a hazard is something that will indefinitely cause harm, whereas a risk has a chance of causing harm, whether it is a high or low chance. It is further stated that all risks have the potential to become hazards due to three main factors. Firstly, a child's lack of experience, for example they may not have the physical skills to balance strongly on new terrain, secondly, lack of knowledge, for example a child may not understand the risks involved in certain activities such as if they choose to climb a tree to the top, then they must figure out a way to come back down again. And finally, a child may not be developmentally ready for a new challenge and will not recognise for themselves that they are not ready to undertake it. Therefore, due to such reasons it is important that adults manage the level of risk involved to make sure children do not come to serious harm (Gill, 2016).

Play England (2015) states that children have a need to experience challenges and risks. Whether children are inside the classroom or outdoors - or any other environment where they might play - play provision is key to making sure children are safe and all hazards and severe risks are managed appropriately. Play Wales (2016) suggests the ABC model (Actions, Behavioural modes, Context) is an appropriate way to observe and carry out risk assessments. For example, 'actions' looks at the possible movements that may result in harm, 'behavioural modes' examines whether children are able to manage their own behaviour and the potential risks to themselves and others around them and finally, 'context' guides adults to identify any factors that may contribute to the severity of harm, such as the resources involved or the current weather conditions that may affect behaviour. By following just this one example of risk assessment, adults can scaffold the environment and play opportunities for children to successfully balance the level of risk and the safety of children.

Section 3

One method of observation is the Foundation Phase Profile put in place by the Welsh Government as part of the Early Years Development and Assessment Framework. This is supported by the Welsh Government (2017), who further explains that assessments usually take place in the first 6 weeks of a child beginning the Foundation Phase. The Welsh

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Government (2016) shows that children are assessed based on their abilities and not necessarily their age. This is measured through different progress levels intending to show the capability and stage of development of the child, ranging from 'bronze' to 'outcome 6'. This is also supported by The Welsh Government (2017).

The Foundation Phase is the statutory national curriculum in Wales which is delivered to all children between the ages of 3 and 5 (National Day Nurseries Association, 2019). The Welsh Government (2016) shows that during observations, the Foundation Phase Profile form firstly focusses on personal and social development, which looks at a child's level of social interactions and responses to others. Secondly, the profile examines language and literacy skills, which focusses on a child's level of understanding and listening, reading, writing and expressive language during play. Thirdly, mathematical development is observed, which examines a child's ability to count, do additions, subtractions and identify shapes. Finally, the Welsh Government's (2016) Foundation Phase Profile form looks at a child's physical development. This area focusses on observing fine motor skills and gross motor skills such as a child's capability to hold and use scissors, or run, jump, balance, or climb. By using the Foundation Phase Profile form of observation, this allows practitioners to track and understand children's developmental ability and learn more about their preferred ways of learning.

There are several benefits to observing children using the Foundation Phase Profile. The Foundation Phase Profile Handbook from the Welsh Government (2017) states that it aims to identify possible early developmental delay in children, as well as identifying possible Additional Learning Needs (ALN). This is beneficial because it allows adults to recognise the areas children are developing slowly in, which will result in adults being able to quickly provide the resources and support that these children need to aid their development properly. Also, another benefit is that the Foundation Phase Profile observation method is consistently used across the whole of Wales (Welsh Government, 2015). This means that Early Years settings are carrying out the same assessment method, which allows different settings to compare their results – poor or good - efficiently. As a result, settings can communicate to support each other and offer new ideas to help support future observations and their findings. Another benefit of this observation method could be that it supports adults to provide a holistic curriculum (Welsh Government, 2017). As a result, children's development in the 4 areas of learning (focused on in the Foundation Phase Profile) can be supported as a whole during their learning.

It can be argued that the Foundation Phase Profile has some limitations. As the assessment must take place within the first 6 weeks of children entering the foundation phase (Welsh Government, 2017), there is a possibility that children are not fully settled or confident in their new environment. Therefore, this suggests that children may not perform to the best of their ability as they may be shy or reserved in activities. Maslow's hierarchy of needs – as explained by Mcleod (2020) - supports this idea. The needs in the bottom two tiers of the pyramid (food and water, but also safety and security) need to be fulfilled by adults first, before a child can reach the top tier of self-actualisation. So, if children have only been in a new setting for 6 weeks, they may not feel safe and secure just yet. An additional limitation of the Foundation Phase Profile could be that there is nowhere to record why a child may not have performed as well as the adult knows they can. Marokus (2014) suggests that there could be several reasons for poor performance or bad behaviour, including stresses at home (such as arguments, moving home or parent separation). It is important that outside factors such as this can be recorded so that children are not assumed to be doing their best but naturally under achieving.

Finally, Welsh Government (2015) states there are 7 areas of learning in the Foundation Phase Curriculum. However, Welsh Government (2017) shows that the Foundation Phase Profile only considers 4 of those areas as mentioned above. Therefore, it can be argued that this does not provide a holistic view of the child, as welsh language development, creative development and their knowledge and understanding of the world is not considered.

Section 4

The Welsh Government (2008) suggests that the main reason adults observe children is to collect information on their individual stages of development. By doing so, this allows adults to analyse a child's progress and therefore can identify if they need extra support in their learning to encourage development. According to Howard and McInnes (2012), the most beneficial time to observe children is when they are at play. They suggest that children are more likely to engage in an activity if they consider it to be 'play' rather than 'not play'. This is because children will be the most relaxed and ease that they can be and will therefore learn more when they do not think they are playing. As a result, they are more likely to perform at their highest level of development and show their full potential. In addition, if children perceive an activity as play, the growth of their emotional well-being will be positive and stable. Therefore, Howard and McInnes (2012) suggests that this gives observing adults an accurate

insight into how well a child is progressing in their learning and development, but also allows adults to identify any children that may need extra opportunities to help support their growth and understanding.

Howard and McInnes (2012) further supports the idea that observing children while they are playing provides adults with an accurate representation of their level of learning and development. This is acknowledged through their study of 129 children between the ages of 3 and 5. The study encouraged children to engage in activities carried out through the mode of play and the others not through play. The children who engaged in the activities through the medium of play were found to perform much better in their assessments and have a higher positive state of emotional well-being. They were focused on the task, smiling, and laughing more and had positive body language. Howard and McInnes (2012) states that the children who took part in the activities that were not playful were easily distracted from the task, complained more about what they were doing and finally, their body language was often negatively positioned.

Howard and McInnes (2012) concludes that adults should widen their knowledge through training (especially practitioners in early years settings) to understand children's perception of play. By doing so, adults can plan to provide sessions for children which involve play and will therefore help maximise their developmental potential. Adults can also support children's developmental opportunities by observing play and listening to what a child needs and wants. Sturrock and Else (1998) introduced the Play Cycle and suggests that adults should respond to children's play cues. A play cue is a signal from a child showing they want to play. This could be as simple as making eye contact with another adult (or child) and asking them to play (Oxfordshire Play Association, 2015). They further explain that by responding to a play cue, adults are providing a 'play return'. This creates an exciting and engaging play space for the child and lets the child feel motivated and encouraged to involve themselves fully in an activity. From this point, adults can remove themselves from the play space and step back to observe the children, who are moving and playing naturally. Howard and McInnes (2012) also supports the idea that when adults remove themselves, this allows children to choose who they play with, what to play with and where to play. Therefore, by allowing children to make their own decisions, adults can improve their own understanding of a child's ideas, movements, and progress by recording accurate assessment details. As a result, adults can plan sessions to involve play to help support children in their development. (Sands, 2013).

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