

Children's Play: Theory and Practice

Section 1

There is no one definition of the meaning of play, play is a way for which children learn and develop Skills. When play is self-directed, chosen freely by the child, they are learning through the freedom to explore, to act out their experiences through play in the environment in which they are choosing to play in, this changes from day to day. Play should be flexible, adaptable, and uninterrupted, allowing the child to be emotive and to have limitless creativity. Enabling the child to play and explore in a way that is unique to them. Bob Hughes (1990) article suggests Adults should allow and encourage children to be themselves. Play facilitates the development of the child as an individual enabling them to decide on their identity for themselves. Children should be allowed to have maximum opportunity from a rich variety of experiences, to grow up with the best possible range of knowledge through experience. There are many different types of play and discussions around play, however for the purpose of this paper the discussion will be about two different types of play and how they enable the holistic development of the child. These will be Mastery Play and Locomotor play.

Mastery Play - This type of play emphasizes physical control and manipulation, providing to encourage the development of Gross and Fine motor skills. Building persistence and resilience and teaching the skill of emotional regulation, building confidence. Developing cognitive development and skill acquisition. This type of play develops holistic development, teaching the child to gain control over the physical affective aspects of their environment, for the child to understand if they can or how they can manipulate their environment. Allowing for the child to experiment, to learn and develop, giving the child a sense of competence and achievement, learning to express how they feel about their play. It has been suggested from the (Mastery and exercise play interventions journal 2015), that children that have motor delays spend more time as an onlooker, they tend not to join in play with their peers (Bar-Haim and Bart 2006; Kennedy-Behr, Rodgers, and Mickan 2011) By consequence, these children that exhibit behaviors of solitary functional play (Bar-Haim and Bart 2006). Play is critical to healthy child development (Pellegrini and Smith 1998), Exercise play is considered as an essential form of play that entails gross movements to develop strength and endurance as well as whole-body coordination (Pellegrini and Smith 1998) Exercise play seems to influence the social development of children by facilitating strategies used by children when they play with their peers (Barbour 1999) Cognitive strategies help children to learn their motor skills, including modelling and verbal cues. Janelle et al. (2003) suggests that these strategies strengthen self-instruction and self-monitoring, while Weiss and Giel (2005) suggest these strategies are an essential tool for less experienced learners. The literature from the (Mastery and exercise play interventions journal 2015), also states, within MC (Valentini and Rudisill,

2004a, 2004b) and EP Interventions (Bar-Haim and Bart 2006, Pellegrini, and Smith 1998) have suggested that skill acquisition could be promoted by encouraging intensive play interactions with peers.

Locomotor Play - this play focuses on movement and physical exploration; they experience exhilaration of physical play. Engaging in physical activity and moving their body, learning coordination through the child's own experience, and exploring different movements. This type of play can involve skipping, jumping, play fighting, playing chase, imagination is used as a child, or children can be playing and pretending to be goodies or baddies or pretending to be their favorite superhero. The benefits of locomotor play helps to develop spatial awareness, balance, the coordination of the larger limbs, Visual-spatial awareness, and cardiovascular fitness. The more that a child uses Locomotor play the more pathways are created in the brain to accommodate the muscle memory learning. The more a child engages in this play the easier they will be able to perform these skills and muscle memory will take over. Suggested from the (Mastery and exercise play interventions journal 2015), Vygotsky (1997b), believed the creation of an imaginary situation, to take on and act out different roles, plays an important function in the development of higher mental functions. It is suggested that this type of play is free play and can be social or solitary play, a play activity that can appear to be 'purposeless,' or to occur for its own sake and is enjoyable to the child. (Martin & Caro, 1985; Rubin et al, 1984). Mastery play emphasizes control and manipulation, while locomotor play focuses on movement and physical exploration. Both types of play contribute to a child's holistic development and wellbeing.

Section 2

Children should have the freedom to choose self-directed play, to choose the type of game, activity or play in whichever way they direct themselves to do so, with the resources that are in and around the environment that they are in at that present time. The (Howard and McInnes paper 2021) suggests, play is an essential part of a child's development and is such an important skill for a child, play teaches children to build relationships, to share their interests and learn how to share. Literature from the (Environment and Urbanization 1990 article) also suggests that there are many links between play and emotional well-being(e.g. Lester & Russell 2008; House & Loewenthal 2009, Huges 2010). Children, through play, learn to manage their own behaviour and emotions, gaining the skills to communicate effectively and to sort out any issues that they may have with their peers. For children play involves them acting out their own experiences, what they have seen and experienced themselves. Through their own inspiration play becomes meaningful, purposeful and motivates children. Self-directed play should include types of play such as physical play, cognitive play, and social play. This type of play is valued in childhood sociology as it enhances children's problem-solving skills while they are experiencing the joy of self-discovery and without fear of failure. (Hoffmann and Russ, 2016, Riley and Jones, 2010). Self-directed play has a significant role in child development. Children will play next to each other in the beginning but as they start to see what their peers are doing around them; they will start to show interest in each other and become interested in what each other are doing. (2012 siren film production). This is when children start to interact with their peers and not just playing alongside them. (The hidden value of in-between spaces for children's self-directed play, Journal 2019) has suggested, when

children are partaking in self-directed play, they are using their imagination and pretending continually. Children will interact lovely with each other and start producing ideas, they will start to learn strategies and evolve their ideas, learning to compromise and create rules for their games to try and work out how they can be fair with each other. Self-directed play is a type of autonomous play that evolves when children freely choose what to play and make up their own rules for how to play based on their own self-led, intrinsically motivated interests (Hughes, 2012, Juster, 2015, Vygotsky, 1980). Children start to learn to listen to each other, taking turns to listen and understand the value of each other's opinions. When children are playing outdoors, they will push themselves physically and create their own challenges through play, learning risk and what their bodies can do and learning their own limitations. Children learn teamwork and how to work together through the games that they are playing. When children can take part in play that is self-directed their thoughts and opinions are growing, sharing ideas, and talking about what they are doing or describing what they are drawing. Self-directed play shapes the way children think. The children are becoming more sociable and learning language skills. When children are using their imagination and pretending in their play, they are also learning empathy and to be empathic to one another, caring for and looking after their peers. Children can demonstrate increased emotional well-being when they perceive an activity as play rather than not play (Howard & McInnes, 2012). Adults can support children with self-directed play by being creative with the learning environment and for adults to allow children to explore and be creative. Adults should observe children from a distance so as not to interrupt the imagination of the games that are being played. It has been demonstrated that children use cues, such as location of the activity, adult presence, and choice to determine whether they perceive an activity as play, (e.g., Kärby 1989; Wing 1995; Howard 2012). The play cycle (notes from class 26th Feb 2024) suggest that child will give cue's to adults when they would like to interact with them. The adults in the environment should understand the right moment and recognise when a child has given them a verbal cue, a gesture or invited them into their play. The adult should be showing genuine interest and listening. The EYFS framework (2012) suggests that adults in the setting should be asking open-ended questions, and offering discussion and challenges to children in their play where it is needed. If adults become too involved in a child's play it is no longer self-directed and the adult will become a barrier between the child and their play. (Howard & McInnes, 2012 paper) suggests that practitioners should be trained to enable them to understand the views about play of the children in their setting. Practitioners should create playful situations which maximise the developmental potential of play.

Section,3

Professional practitioners are consistently observing children in their early years setting. A practitioner that observes their cohort should observe children participating in self-led activities,

as much as possible. Child observation will help to tell the practitioner about the child, such as their interests, how they interact with their peers and cohort, and the friendship groups they make. The EYFS (2012) suggests that practitioners should be using on-going assessments on a daily basis, observing what the child can do already. Allowing the practitioner to identify the next steps and the interventions needed to be put in place to support each child. The practitioner will be able to observe how strong the child's fine and gross motor skills are developing, their strengths and weaknesses. Also witnessing the challenges, the children set themselves to further develop their own learning through their play. (A Reflective guide to early years practitioners, 2021) Journal, suggests that each practitioner should recognise the unique attributes of the children in their group and follow the process of observation and reflection. The children can be observed individually or with their peers and as a cohort. It is important that practitioners are observing children in both an indoor and outdoor setting, the more that children are observed will give the practitioner the best opportunity to get to know their children, enabling them to see which environment a child thrives in and which environment they need more support in. The Early years foundation stage framework (2023) states that it is an integral part of children's learning and development process is to know what children can and cannot do and the interests of the child to shape the teaching and learning experiences. An early year's setting may have an observation method such as the, Eylog (the early years log software, eylog.co.uk) This method of observation is an integrated web or tablet-based app, that can be used in a childcare, nursery to reception setting. This method is similar to a written Running record. This app allows practitioners to record, monitor and plan a child's development through capturing observations. Providing a more detailed insight into the progress of a child. This sets a precedent for reflective thinking for both the practitioner and the child. Practitioners can also use this method of observation to share the progression of the child with their parents, allowing both parties to communicate with each other. Also enabling parents to view their child's learning. This method of observation allows the practitioner to make a written observation, to take pictures or videos of the observations. The eylog allows each observation to link with the characteristics of the development matters. These areas of development are communication and language, personal, social and emotional development, physical development, literacy, numeracy, understanding the world and expressive art and design. EYFS (2023) Gov.uk informs practitioners of the learning and development area that should be taught in early years. The Eylog Supports the EYFS curriculum, recording and logging the characteristics of each observation, meeting the early learning goals for each child. This type of observation gives a holistic overview of the child by enabling the practitioner to plan accordingly and target learning for the next steps, benefiting the learning progression of each child in the setting. Once the observation is recorded, the practitioner can attach the observation to the development matter characteristics, these suggest the goals that the children are expected to reach at age range from babies, 3-4 years Nursery and 4-5 years Reception. This observation method saves observations into folders attached to the system, also for the senior lead teams to view. The practitioner using this method should ensure they have written the observation with language that another reader would understand clearly, they must also link the observation to the correct early learning goals, listed in the development matters folder. It is possible that when using the eylog software, the practitioner could be looking more at the device they are using more than the children as it is possible to observe continually as the device can be carried around. The practitioner should

recognise when to record an observation to find the right balance as not every activity would need to be recorded.

Section 4

Observations record the development and learning of a child, enabling the practitioner to develop the further learning and development of each child. The EYFS, (2012) guide, suggests that ongoing formative assessment is at the very center of effective early years practice. The practitioner can plan for continuous provision, planned activities and also learn from the child's parents about the activities the child likes to do at home. Interventions can be planned and put into place for the child's next steps enabling them to reach their early learning goals. Then incorporating the EYFS curriculum into the interventions planned for each child from the information recorded from the observations. The play cycle viewed on the EYFS, (2012) guide. Shows that the child is the centre of all learning, observation should come first, a practitioner should look, listen, and write notes, the assessment of the observation should then be analysed to see what the child tells us about themselves. Next steps are the planning for the child, does the child have the right opportunities and experience given to them, the role of the practitioner is to ensure that the resources and the right learning environment are available. The importance of observing children in their environment from standing back and watching through play allows practitioners to see the progression of a child when they are left to play and explore naturally. When the adults observe while interacting with the children, they will find they may get a different result from that child when they are standing back and observing, an adult involved in play may have interrupted the child and they no longer consider what they were doing fun or as play anymore. The (Howard and McInnes, 2012) paper suggests that a child who is playing will continue their play and the activity will be continued until they choose to stop and change activity. If a child is stopped in their play by being interrupted or told to play in another way by an adult, the child will lose interest and no longer want to carry on with the activity. The adults in the setting can support and enable children to express themselves freely and to learn continuously through play. By preparing the learning environment that allows the children to have access to resources, to allow the children to partake in continuous provision, allow them to explore, to experiment, to use their imagination and to be creative. The (Howard and McInnes, 2012) paper suggests that children through play demonstrate and show an increased level of emotional wellbeing, providing the importance of collecting this evidence through observation. The paper also suggests that children in play that is being adult led will not see this as play especially if the play is being controlled by the adult. The children are then not experiencing the same level of emotional wellbeing. The enabling adult should see the child as an individual. The EYFS (2012) guide suggests that early years practitioners aim to do all they can to help each child have the best possible start in life. Also, the UNCRC, (2009) UK GOV, states that every child has the right to provision enabling them to develop their personalities, talents, and abilities, regardless of their abilities, race, gender, and background. Children thrive in different environments, there are children that excel in the structure of the classroom environment. Others show their strengths through creativity and exploring, then some children are stronger in a physical environment. Observing children will show their strengths and weakness in each

environment. Observing children in just one setting or just an adult- led learning environment will prevent the practitioner from seeing the unique child and the needs of each child will not be met which will result in the child not reaching their fullest potential. The EYFS (2010) suggests the practitioner should recognise the unique child, build positive relationships, ensure they are learning in an enabling environment which will result in the way a child will develop and learn. Ensuring that meeting the children's needs through observation and intervention encourages the development and learning of the unique child. Practitioners should enable children to learn through self-directed play.

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