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SECTION 1

All children have the right to play, and this is stated in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), (UNICEF, 2019). A child being able to play is one of the most important components of a child's life, it is necessary for growth and learning (McInness, *et al,* 2011*)*. It also adds value to emotional, well-being and physical development. It allows the children to be free by making own choices in situations where the play is child-led like the Montessori method it encourages the child to make own decisions what they want to play, where and for how long (Atkinson, *et al,* 2017).

Play allows a child to be creative and through this improving the child's cognitive development as the child grows and experiences different and new experiences through play (Bottrill, 2022). Piaget's theory is the different stages of development in children playing and the different cognitive development that occurs, the theory was achieved by observations and the results of what stage children are likely to achieve own thinking, exploring, figuring things out, to take risks but calculated safe risks. He believed play helped the children to discover own interests, abilities, and limitations (Mooney, 2013).

Children have the right to choose what type of play they want to initiate and participate in. Different types of play encourage different development, therefore a holistic learning experience for the children. It is a great opportunity for practitioners to observe and help with planning future activities to encourage further development opportunities. (Welsh Government, 2022).

Here are examples of two different types of play. Heuristic play and functional play. Both can be played indoors and outdoors. Heuristic play is when babies and children are provided with a variety of various objects. It is used as an early learning technique from the time a baby can sit up. These objects can be household goods such as hair rollers or door stops, furry objects such as pom poms or furry socks, natural objects such as acorns or leave, they are investigated and are able to be

used to build or create something out of them. For babies' suitable object are placed in a treasure basket and they are free to explore with hands and mouth, and for toddlers the items may be placed in activity trays, on tables or in a contained area in a supervised environment but where the activity does not include adult intervention or instructions. The children decide, plan, draw, cut, assemble, mould, stack and test themselves by making own choices (Community playthings, 2012)

Heuristic play's major goal is to provide children with a range of sensory stimulation, which enhances sensory motor development and cognitive growth, exercise imagination and creative thinking, promotes problem solving, critical thinking and helps build confidence and concentration by exploring by sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste. Children can learn at own speed and to learn to play independently and alongside others (Twinkl, 2023).

Functional play starts when a baby learns to control own body and to hold objects. Piaget, theory of cognitive development supports functional play as an important part of development (Mooney, 2013). It is achieved when a toy like a rattle is shaken over and over and when a child plays with an object as you would expect, for example while playing with a car and rolls it on the floor making the car move or picks up a phone, puts it to owns ear and mimics a conversation by babbling or speaking. It helps a child make sense of the world around them by experiencing items and using them for what they are meant for increasing the child's fine and gross motor skills. A child develops problem solving skills through action and objects and learn the difference between soft and hard, slow and fast and how things work together. It is also important for social interactions as children often interact with each other (Play and playground encyclopaedia, 2023).

During functional play, children develop the ability to stimulate brain function through reasoning, drawing conclusions, coming up with original ideas and practise patience. Each child goes through specific development stages, which can be aided and supported by their interactions with adults, other children, and the surroundings (Welsh Government, 2022). Adults can give cues when a child has difficulty using an object for example, building blocks. The adult can show the child how to place one block on top of the other or build a tower. The child can then copy the action of the adult, repeating what they have seen and shown (Bee, 2020).

SECTION 2

Howard and McIness (2012) states that children exhibit higher evidence of emotional health when the children believe an activity is enjoyable and considers the activity as play. Self-direct play is important for children's development as it fosters their imagination, creativity, problem-solving skills and independence. There are several ways adults and practitioners can support and encourage self- directed play by implementing the Play cycle and the Playwork principles as stated in (Play Wales Chwarae Cymru, 2023) which have also been incorporated into the Foundation Phase and The Curriculum for Non-Maintained Nursery settings and Play sufficiency assessments for play in the community. These include:

- Providing a safe and stimulating environment, ensuring the children have access to safe, clean and clutter free spaces where they can explore and play freely. This could be a classroom, garden (Welsh Government, 2015) or in the community such as a park (Swansea Council, 2022).
- Offering appropriate resources, open-ended toys and materials that can be used in multiple ways such as building blocks, dressing up clothes, art supplies, natural material such as sticks, pieces of wood and which is age appropriate. These materials allow the child to create own play scenarios and develop the child's creativity (Welsh Government, 2022).
- Encourage the child to engage in activities that promote physical activity, social interaction, and imagination, these can include outdoor play, board games and reading (Welsh Government, 2022).
- Encourage problem solving and creativity by asking open-ended questions and offering challenges that can be solved through play. This can help children develop critical thinking skills and become more confident (Welsh Government, 2022).
- Set aside regular time for play and make it a priority. This can include designating a specific time for play each day, balancing risk with the well being and the development benefits for the children (Welsh Government, 2022).
- The importance of playworkers is to be appropriately qualified (Welsh Government, 2017) and to support and facilitate the play process, to contribute to the creation of the play policy, strategy, education and acquiring

training in reflective practise and current knowledge of the play process (Howard and McInnes, 2012).

Play is important for a variety of reasons:

- Developmental benefits – play is essential for the physical, emotional, social and cognitive development. Through play, children learn to use their bodies communicate with others, explore the environment, and solve problems (Bottrill, 2022).
- Stress relief – play is a natural stress reliever, and it can help reduce anxiety, depression and other negative emotions caused by trauma which children may experience or witness, or from natural or manmade disasters. Children can process difficult emotions, relax and build relationships (Simplified playgrounds, 2022).
- Creativity and imagination – play can stimulate creativity and imagination by engaging in imaginative play, children can explore new ideas and solutions to problems independently (Bottrill, 2022)
- Socialisation – play provides an opportunity to aid in social skill development such as cooperation, communication and negotiation. This is especially important for children who are learning how to interact with others (Welsh Government. 2022a).
- Physical health – play promotes physical activity and helps maintain a healthy lifestyle. It can also improve fine and gross motor skills, hand-eye coordination, and balance (Welsh Government, 2022a).

Play is an essential aspect of child development and underpins the Foundation Phase and The New Curriculum for Non-Maintained Nursery settings. It is advised that early years' practitioners use a pedagogy that encourages play and learning (McInness, *et al.,* 2011). This can be achieved by implementing the Play cycle and Playwork principles which established a professional and ethical framework for playworkers to work within. As stated in King and Sturrock (2020) the play cycle was introduced by Gordon Sturrock and the late Professor Perry Else in the 'Colorado Paper' in 1998 and it is a process that children naturally engage in during play, it is described as a universal expressive language. It encourages practitioners to

understand play better and how best to support (intervention) and encourage and how adult intervention effects or the disruption of play (adulteration).

King and Sturrock (2020) explains it is the natural flow of play that includes the initial phase of anticipation (metaludes) in thoughtful and stimulating spaces and seeking out play through a look or a gesture (cue), followed by an immersive phase of engagement (return) and exploration (frames), and (annihilation) the child deciding to end the play, ending with a phase of reflecting and potential learning. Each stage of the cycle serves an important purpose, as anticipation and seeking out play allows for creativity and imagination, engagement and exploration promotes curiosity and learning, and reflection and potential learning encourages problem-solving and decision making.

However, it is important to note that not all types of play will follow the play cycle in the same way, and some forms of play may involve different stages or different patterns of engagement. Additionally, individual differences in personality, culture and experiences can also influence how children experience and engage in play. Nonetheless, overall, the play cycle is a useful way of understanding and analysing the benefits of play (King and Sturrock, 2020).

SECTION 3

Observations are used to gain an insight into children's interests, strengths and weaknesses in areas of development. Some observation tools are designed to provide a holistic view of a child's development and behaviour, considering multiple areas of development such as cognitive, language, social-emotional and physical development. These tools are often used in early years settings, where practitioners need to assess children's overall development and design appropriate interventions to support the children's learning and growth (Welsh Government, 2022a).

Some observation tools may focus on a specific area of development or behaviour, such as language development, social skills, or fine motor skills. These tools are often used in specialised settings, such as speech therapy or occupational therapy, where professionals need to track progress in specific areas of development (Frost, *et al.* 2013). It is important to note that no single observation tool can provide a

complete picture of a child's development and behaviour. Information collected should be used to inform parents or carers of the child's progress through an annual report, parent evenings or an informal discussion at the end of a session, by phone or email. Observation tools should be used in combination with other assessment methods, such as parent's observations and feedback, other practitioner reports or observations, if the child attend another childcare setting or a teachers report if the child also attends a nursery at a school, this will help gain a more comprehensive understanding of a child's strengths, challenges and needs (Welsh Government, 2017).

Here are some benefits and limitations of using and completing an observation tool such as the foundation phase profile observation tool:

Benefits

The foundation phase profile observation form provides valuable information. It allows standardisation and consistency between settings by using the same observation forms. Observing children allows practitioners and parents to gather information about children's skills, abilities, interests and behaviours. This information can be used to understand the child better, plan appropriate activities, support the children's development, and set targets for further development. Observations help to individualise learning for each child by identifying their strengths and weaknesses. Practitioners and parents can use this information to tailor the teaching techniques and interactions with the child to meet their specific needs. Early observations can lead to early intervention of potential development delays or difficulties it can help to facilitate early interventions and support. The earlier support is provided, the greater the chances of positive outcomes (Welsh Government, 2017). According to Frost, *et al.,* (2013) *and* Welsh Government (2017) observing children can also help to build positive relationships with the children and the children's families. Parents appreciate practitioners who take the time to understand their child and provide personalised support.

Limitations

Completing a foundation phase profile observation form can be time consuming to administer, especially if observations are carried out over a long period of time. Maybe a change of recording observation may be needed (Welsh Government,

2022b). If the environment is not suitable and the child shows lack of interest adjustments may be needed this is in accordance with Bronfenbrenner theory where suitable environments is regarded as a huge influence on human development and can influence every facet of a child's life (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022). It can also be difficult to observe if the practitioner and the child are uncomfortable in each other's company. This can be a challenge for practitioners who already have many demands during the working day. Observations can be subject to the observer's interpretation and bias, which may affect the reliability and validity of the data collected. Observation can only capture a limited scope of the child's development. It may not be able to capture aspects of development that are not easily observable, such as internal thoughts processes, emotions and motivations. Teach early years (2023) illustrates that observations need to be conducted in a way that respects children's privacy and rights. This can be a challenge when observing young children who may not fully understand the implications of being observed. It may not tell us the cause of any problems as children are not being themselves. It may not give a true reflection of abilities if a child needs time to adjust from transitioning from one setting to another. Observations may be difficult if the child only attend a setting once a week. Practitioners may not have the appropriate experience or training therefore observations may be missed or logged incorrectly (Howard and McInness, 2012).

Observations may also be recorded in other formats, for example. by taking photos, filming using an iPad or a phone, keeping a sample of the child's work, observations written on post it notes throughout the day and collated at the end of the day, discussions with colleagues to compare observations, if time is limited or actual evidence is needed (Bradbury, 2014).

SECTION 4

Play is a natural way that children learn and develop skills, it is the way that children explore and make sense of the world around them. Through play children develop skills such as problem-solving, creativity and social skills (McInness *et al.,* 2013). Play allows for observation of multiple developmental domains. When children play, they engage in a range of activities that can provide insights into their cognitive language, motor, social and emotional development. Observing children during play

can help identify strengths and areas for improvement in different domains. Play creates a comfortable and non-threatening environment. For many children, play is a comfortable and familiar environment where they feel more relaxed and open to exploring and expressing themselves. Observing children during play can help provide a more accurate picture of their true abilities and behaviours (Bottrill, 2022).

McInness *et al.,* (2013) and Howard and McInness, (2012) concluding findings were practitioners need to learn to move away from traditional practitioners' definitions of play and to understand and learn what play is from a child's point of view to be able to engage in an effective setting which use a combination of child-led and adult-led activities. Practitioners need to interact and engage with children to allow development through children's own activities. Bottrill (2020) also agrees that children are on an individual journey and should be allowed to immerse in a rich environment of communication and social interaction to achieve development at own pace and independently.

Frost, A., *et al.* (2013) believes that during observations, children can provide an insight into underlying emotional or behavioural issues but unfortunately it may not give the answer to what the actual problem is. The child may have different behaviours in different environments and settings resulting in the outcomes of observations being very different. The child may find it difficult to express in words but through play, they can express feelings and thoughts more easily, for example, a child who is struggling with anxiety or disengagement, may exhibit nervous behaviours during play that are not apparent during a structured assessment. This can be achieved through nondirective play where the child is encouraged to work towards own solutions to problems or directive play where the therapist gives directions to the child to achieve therapeutic targets (Gaikwad, 2015)

Through observations it could lead to the child needing support with special education needs (SEN), additional learning needs (ALN) or play therapy (Welsh Government, 2017). Play therapy as suggested by Gaikwad, (2015) could be beneficial if the child has experienced personal trauma for example sexual, physical or emotional abuse, domestic violence which the child has experienced or witnessed, child may be having difficulties in foster care, or the transitions experienced during adoption, loss or a death of a loved one.

Play is an important part of all children's lives and this opportunity to play should be extended from the home, the setting the child attends to the community. Swansea Council (2022) Play sufficiency assessment aims to provide adequate and safe facilities and spaces for the children to play, making them inclusive to children who need support and access to the facilities. Children, parents, the public and play professionals can all express personal views in improving the outcomes of local community play opportunities. Children need new experiences to open new worlds of imagination, through adventures and the great outdoors (Bottrill, 2022).

Children can also enjoy outdoor in-between natural spaces such as under stairs or massive tree trunks, the children are able to use imagination to use the space as a house or other games. These spaces can be found in the community and at settings and should be carefully made child friendly by authorities and professionals who design them (Aminpour *et al.,* 2019).

Reggio Emilia approach believes parents and the wider community have the responsibility for a child's development, it promotes inclusiveness with everybody working together in observing the child, discovering what the child knows, what challenges the child and what the child is curious about (Flavin, 2020). Furthermore, New Zealand Ministry of Education (2017) and Te Whariki approach also allows the child to take the lead to develop from the environment the child is in and the relationships that is built with others. Practitioners adapting these approaches within curriculums are providing the best possible experience for any child to develop at own pace and to be happy through play during the child's early years.

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