

Cover sheet

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Assignment title and number: ECEY4003 Children's Play: Theory and Practice

AI Cover sheet

Section 1: Discuss two types of play and how these can be supported in practice.

Section 2: Evidence of a clear understanding of why it is important for children to choose their own play and the importance of the role of the adult in children's play.

Section 3: In depth discussion and understanding of an observation method for young children.

Section 4: Demonstrate an understanding of the role of play when undertaking observations and assessments of children and consider how this affects the child's engagement and the accuracy of the observation.

Reference list

AI Acknowledgement

I acknowledge the use of Grammarly (<https://www.grammarly.com/>) on 23 February 2025 to check my work using the prompts:

1. Check the text for readability, grammar, and syntax.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Children's Play: Theory and Practice

Section 1:

Children's play may be complex, but the Welsh Assembly Government (2002) defines it in their Play Policy by stating: "Play encompasses children's behaviour which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development – not only for individual children but also for the society in which they live".

They believe that play is a crucial element in fostering a child's holistic development, supporting their social, mental, physical, and emotional needs, as well as their creative skills. The Policy ensures that society actively seeks to help support a child's opportunity to play (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002).

Furthermore, Article 31 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 2017 encourages this. It advocates that Governments must ensure children have the right to play, relax, and participate in various cultural and artistic activities. It also ensures that play is not used as a reward for children for completing tasks or displaying preferred behaviours, nor can it be taken away from the child as a form of punishment.

Philosopher John Locke (cited in The Power of Play, 2020) believed that children were born "tabula rasa," meaning a blank slate, and suggested that play was paramount in shaping their learning.

However, children can engage in numerous play types (Play Wales, 2017), from physical and exploratory to constructive and creative. Here, sensory play and physical play will be discussed in more depth.

Sensory stimulation and play are a play type that involves the senses, such as olfactory, auditory, visual and gustatory (Octaviana et al., 2022) and has been suggested as a key component in young children's learning about themselves and the world in which they live (Perry, Hogan, and Marlin, 2000, cited in Gascoyne, 2017).

Sensory play can also positively impact all aspects of a child's development. It helps support the development of speech and language, fine and gross motor skills, cognitive abilities, and social interactions (Octaviana et al., 2022).

The Montessori sensory curriculum is a fantastic illustration of this, ensuring that the materials and activities they use help enhance and refine the child's sensory perception. Thus, supporting the development of their cognitive, fine motor and problem-solving abilities (Montessori Oaks, 2023). Dr Maria Montessori believed that sensory play was not just about play. Instead, it was about nurturing the child as a whole, supporting their holistic development, and helping develop their senses. In return, the children would gain an in-depth awareness of the world around them, providing a solid foundation for further success (Care Learning, 2024).

Another type of play essential for a child's holistic development is physical play, sometimes referred to as active play. Play Scotland (2025) outlines the significance of physical activity in early childhood, suggesting its importance in a child's mental and cognitive development. Active play is not hindered by just the physical benefits it can prescribe, but it can also indubitably support a child's mental well-being by relieving stress, improving sleep and energy levels, and helping strengthen their muscles and bones (Early Years Resource, 2018).

The NHS (2022) also reinforces this, suggesting that children aged 3-4 should engage in at least 180 minutes of physical activity throughout the day, including outdoor and active play, to help properly support all areas of development.

In addition, physical play is said to be an innate psychological drive in children, helping them set and achieve their own goals through determination and benefiting their self-regulating abilities (Siren Films, 2017).

Both sensory and physical play are underpinned by Mildred Parten Newhall's theory of the six stages of play (1932). She believed children go through these stages as they socially develop. Going from an unoccupied play that occurs from birth to 3 months, which is categorised as random movements and observations, with seemingly unapparent attention, to cooperative play that happens around 4 ½ years and older. This play stage is described as organised and usually has a shared vision and goals, with children assigning their own roles. This is the most social play stage,

and often, children will have developed their social skills and ability to work as a team (Brodie, 2025).

Moreover, Parten's theory has informed several policies and continues to be central to national curricula. The Department for Education (2021) exemplifies this, emphasising play-based learning within the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Vygotsky (1978, cited in Shabani, 2016) was another theorist who supported this. His sociocultural theory highlights play as a fundamental aspect of cognitive development, suggesting that play and learning from play are social processes. When this is teamed with a more knowledgeable other, more often an older child who is already at a higher stage of play (Parten, 1932), the child learns crucial dialogue needed for learning and growth.

Section 2:

Self-directed play is described as play initiated by the child. The child guides their own play, making their own rules and being wholly immersed while doing so (Steiner connection, 2022). The freedom of self-directed play fosters intrinsic motivation and will frequently lack an external aim or desire for reward (Welsh Gov, 2024).

One crucial characteristic of this type of play is the child's autonomy in deciding the course of their play; the child makes their own choices about whom they wish to engage in play with and how that play will be structured. Also, when adults create an environment that enables self-directed play, it ensures that children can explore their interests at a pace that suits them (Montessori School of Berkshire, 2024).

However, it has been suggested that when children ascertain rich play experiences, whether child-directed or not, leading up to official school age, it enhances their learning and developmental outcomes (Lake et al., 2022; Whitebread et al., 2017). One of the earliest advantages of self-directed play could also be the benefits it provides for a child's growth in independence. This could be encouraged if there were authentic opportunities for this type of play.

Furthermore, it also vastly stimulates their imagination; by giving a child basic loose parts, they will make something fascinating and wondrous. All while giving them the opportunity to work at their own pace, construct their own knowledge, and build their confidence. When children are met with an opportunity for self-directed play, they

begin to realise their own strengths and capabilities (The Montessori School of Berkshire, 2022).

As mentioned previously, children need an enabling environment, autonomy over their own play, and a supportive adult to experience self-directed play truly (Montessori School of Berkshire, 2014).

Fletcher and Albrecht (2019) suggested that adults can provide this by simply saying 'yes'. They believe that looking from afar, exerting a nonjudgmental appearance, and using objective dialogue are crucial strategies needed to fully support child-directed play. Adults can further provide an enabling environment by ensuring sufficient opportunities for self-directed play to be sustained, for example, by expanding the child's play with additional materials.

Furthermore, previous research has suggested that "play is not just about having fun but about taking risks, experimenting, and testing boundaries" (Yogman et al., 2018, p. 2). The lines of play are somewhat blurred due to variations in adults' perspectives of what they deem as play and play-based learning. These perspectives guide adults with their decisions about what a child's play should look like (McLean, 2023).

Waters-Davies (2022) highlighted that when adults fully understand what play is, specifically child-led or self-directed play, then they can properly support children to foster their own learning and development. Both learning and play have previously been said to be 'inseparable,' with some believing that children do not always see the contrast between the two (Samuelsson and Pramling, 2014, cited in McLean et al., 2023)

However, a study conducted in 2012 disputes this. The study involved a group of children partaking in the same activity, except for one difference: half the children did the activity under the premise that it was 'just play' and the other half believed it was 'not play'. The findings showed that the children participating in the 'play' activity displayed additional signs of positive emotional well-being, as opposed to the cohort of children executing the activity under the guise of adults (Howard and McInnes, 2012).

Te Whariki, New Zealand's play-based curriculum, has the child's holistic development at its core. An essential aspect of this is the strong emphasis it places

on the teacher being viewed as a facilitator and not an instructor (Ministry of Education, 2025).

This approach could help the adults in the environment better understand a child's cues for play. King (2019) outlines cues in the play cycle. It is described as a 'lure or invite to a person or something present in the environment.' When a child views the teacher as more of an equal, like that in Te Whāriki, they are more likely to offer them play cues. Research supports this. McInnes et al. (2013) suggest that children view an adult's presence as being a barrier to play.

However, there is evidence to suggest that under certain circumstances, an adult presence could encourage an opportunity for a playful learning experience (McInnes et al., 2012 and Whitebread et al., 2007, cited in McInnes et al., 2013).

Section 3:

Observation refers to the practice of watching and recording a child's interactions, behaviours, and development in an environment that is natural to them. This could be at home, an outdoor play space or the classroom. When observations are conducted, it gives the adults an insight into a child's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development (Care Learning, 2025).

However, there are a variety of observational methods that can be used, each with a different aim. Narrative methods are a longer observation type; they include a written record of a child's involvement and language with peers. This method is a deeper approach and takes longer to complete than the Magic Moments technique (Brodie, nd). Contrasting narrative observations, Magic Moments are quick, brief notes, usually written on a 'post-it' note or the like. This method is faster for practitioners and, thus, more convenient. The notes collected would then be correlated in the child's learning journal (Brodie, nd). Additionally, there is the learning stories observation tool. This involves communicating the child's interests, responsibilities, and communication through a story in the first person. Photographs support the observations. This observation method is particularly beneficial in supporting the child as a whole (Brodie, nd). When children are properly observed, it enables adults to gain a better understanding of their strengths, challenges, and needs. Thus, it aids the adult in being able to appropriately apply education strategies, interventions, and play and learning activities (Gunawan, 2023 and Care Learning, 2025).

Here, the Leuven Scale, a non-intrusive observation method, will be explored in greater detail.

The Leuven Scale, developed in 1997 by Professor Ferren Laevers (Laevers et al., 1997), is an observational tool that helps measure a child's well-being and involvement. This method gives practitioners the information they need to accurately assess and improve, if required, their educational setting and practice (Brodie, 2025).

The Leuven Scale monitors well-being using a five-point system ranging from extremely low, meaning the child shows obvious signs of distress, such as crying or screaming, or the child could be withdrawn or behave aggressively. In contrast, if the child is marked at extremely high, it is likely this child is showing signs of contentment, looks happy, and expresses confidence within themselves, their environment and with their peers (Lewis, 2020; Brodie, 2025).

Again, the scale also measures the child's involvement in the same five categories. Suppose the child is marked as being in the extremely low category. In that case, they may typically present as being passive and absent-minded, looking around at others and not involving themselves in play or activities. However, if marked as extremely high, then it is likely the child is exhibiting levels of intense involvement. Usually, children observed here are persistent, creative, and focused (Main, 2021).

The Leuven Scales foundations can also be used to gauge the quality of the provision. Higher involvement usually indicates a better-quality setting (McRae and Jones, 2023). However, the Leuven Scale, like most things, comes with its benefits and limitations. A study conducted in 2016 (Guimaraes et al., 2016) looking into the views of teachers thoughts on using the scale to conduct baseline assessments on entry to primary school found that most teachers agreed with screening for well-being and involvement. It was suggested that the results of the observations would give teachers vital information as a starting point for monitoring children as they settled (Guimaraes et al., 2016).

The benefits suggest that it puts the child at the core of its approach by focusing on their emotional, social, and mental well-being. However, it does not lend the same benefits to children with disabilities or special educational needs. These children, especially those who are nonverbal, would not portray their involvement or well-

being in the same manner as their peers. Therefore, the Leuven Scale is not entirely inclusive (Learning Journals, 2025).

Laevers (1997) has views that are based strongly on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (1943). Both believe that if children are experiencing elevated levels of emotional well-being, then it is a positive indicator that their basic needs are being met. When these needs are met, children become free from emotional constraints, thus being able to properly engage in learning and play (Brodie, 2025).

Furthermore, this observation method helps provide a holistic view of the child's development. With its primary focus on well-being and involvement, it also highlights aspects of cognitive development. If used correctly, the Leuven Scale can give a comprehensive view of the child, helping educators assess, manage, and support children as a whole (Morehouse, nd and Care Learning 2024).

Section 4:

Piaget (cited in Smidt, 2015) believed play was a significant means of learning for children, suggesting that they are active learners at their best when engaged in play. Moyles (2009) also supports this, suggesting that children all over the globe learn best when they are playing. He believes that understanding and learning are strengthened through play, allowing them to learn from experiences firsthand.

A firm belief within early years education is that play is an indispensable cog within the wheels of learning and development (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009, cited in McInnes et al., 2013), and through observations of play, we can gain a better understanding of a child's learning and thinking (Drummond, 1998). This could be why Besio et al. (2018) believe observations of children should be undertaken when the child is playing in an environment that is natural to them. While they are doing an activity that is child-initiated, as opposed to adult-led. A study conducted by McInnes (2012) found that play can be seen as an observable behaviour, and observations during this time would give practitioners a holistic understanding of the child's learning and growth with valuable insights across all developmental domains, including cognitive, emotional and social (Care Learning, 2024).

However, Issacs, a British psychologist and educationalist (cited in Mickleburgh, 2018), believed that knowledge came from observations but also when adults fully

immersed themselves in the child's world. It is from these observations that practitioners can then act concerning their learning process and the planning in which they implement (Gunawan et al., 2023). This is why adults need to ensure they appropriately support and scaffold children during observations of play.

Research around this has demonstrated that when children become familiar with the adults in their environment, they are more likely to adopt a playful approach to their activities (McInnes, 2012), thus providing a more authentic reflection of the child. Furthermore, children must not be aware they are being observed for it to be an accurate observation. As mentioned previously, children use cues to determine if an activity is deemed as play or not play, and cues such as the location, adult presence and choice all help the child ascertain this (Karrby 1989; Wing 1995; Howard 2002, cited in McInnes et al., 2012) and when the child is aware that they are not engaging in an actual play activity, they are more likely to take on the Hawthorne effect and alter their behaviours (Ingram, 2023).

Bottrill (2018) highlights this, suggesting that when children can explore and interact without external pressures, their barriers persistently lower, allowing for a more accurate representation of the child.

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