

What is play?

Play is an open-ended concept which professionals and practitioners are constantly learning more about. Bottril (2018) says that play should be self-chosen and should offer opportunities and challenges for those involved. It should be interpreted however the individual believes with lots of different possibilities. He describes play as creative, imaginative, risky, and collaborative.

Play is a vital part of a child's life. through play, children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional wellbeing can develop. Children gain an understanding of the world around them through their opportunities and interests to play, through which they can develop skills such as confidence, social skills, curiosity, self-esteem, and independence which will help them through life. (indirect, no date). As play is a natural part of a child's life, when entering new environments such as nursery, play is a familiarity for them and creates a link from the new environment to home. as the child likely feels comfortable playing and doing what is familiar to them, by practitioners observing the child they can see what they are already able to do and how to progress their learning (Thornes 2001).

There are many different opinions and theories on play, for example, Piaget believed that play should encourage psychological development. He believed outdoor play involved all aspects of learning. (SOFT surfaces no date) whereas Vygotsky emphasised the importance of cultural and social aspects of play, to encourage children to think in more complex ways.

There are many different types of play, including heuristic play, solitary play, parallel play, and sensory play. Focusing on two types of play: sensory and heuristic play.

Sensory play

Sensory play is an opportunity for children to explore all their senses, developing their understanding of the world around them. Gascoyne (2016) explains different types of sensory activities such as walking in the woods, mixing paint, building smooth wooden blocks, later concluding that they are all linked with the children's senses. Sensory play is used to stimulate children's sight, hearing, touch smell and taste. These experiences can be used in general play or in specific activities, such as feely bags,

fruit tasting and everyday toys that have sensory features. (Walker, no date. Pg. 164). Sensory play can enable children's development to progress from babies. Sensory play such as blowing raspberry's, tickling, massaging and talking can be used with babies to stimulate their senses and encouraging their development. (Tiny happy people, no date). All through life, children and adults use their senses as an effective way to retain information. Memories are linked to senses, for example the smell of something or the sound of a song can trigger flashbacks to a certain memory. By creating ways for children to stimulate their senses, practitioners are allowing them to create these memories. It is important that practitioners support sensory play and opportunities for children, as these experiences build neural connections in the brain, allowing its development, in turn this enables a child to complete more complex tasks and can support cognitive growth, language development, gross motor skills, social interaction and problem-solving skills (educational play care, 2016).

Gascoyne, (2016) explains that the understanding of sensory play is taught through the work of several theorists. John Comenius in the 1600's found sensory experiences rather than formal teaching was more effective for the development of children and introduced illustrations to books to create a visual focus. Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) believed that sensory play and first-hand experiences were a more effective tool for learning. Friedrich Froebel invented the concept of kindergarten, his theory of human development emphasised the importance of hands-on play as he believed children needed to directly experience the world in order to understand it (McIlroy, T. 2022). Maria Montessori (1870- 1952) believed children's senses were their main tools for learning and children's development could be supported by providing these opportunities for children, which is carried through in Montessori settings today.

Heuristic play

Heuristic play is a young child's natural curiosity to play. A baby's way of playing includes exploring objects and discovering what to do with them. Toddlers learn and play by touching and handling things, household objects such as kitchen utensils offer activities for children and enables them the opportunities to learn with real objects where they can practice filling things, stacking objects, knocking objects down and gathering them. When a toddler discovers that an object makes sounds, fits together Et cetera, they will repeat the action of the result, building their cognitive development,

fine muscle control and hand eye coordination. To offer heuristic play to children, practitioners can offer several different objects for children to freely play with independently in a controlled environment (Heleatt, 2012). Similarly to heuristic play, practitioners should allow open ended play for children.

Open-ended play has no rules or boundaries and gives children the opportunities to explore independently. Open ended play should have little adult intervention and should be directed by those playing. Children learn from the resources and environment around them and can develop their independence exploring these. During open-ended play, the play should be child led where adults should step back and observe while being able to offer support where they are needed or wanted. (National Day Nurseries Association, 2017)

As heuristic play supports the independence and child led approach in children's play, it can be compared to the Reggio Emilia approach. This approach follows the principles that children should have control over their learning, learning through experience such as touching, moving, listening, and observing, creating relationships with others, and being allowed to explore, and have opportunities to express themselves. This approach encourages and relates to the importance of loose parts being used which involve the idea of children being able to collect, store, move, manipulate, adapt, control, and combine loose parts and materials at their settings. (National day nurseries association, 2017) these approaches are being introduced in places such as Montessori settings, which have similar approaches. Both Reggio Emilia and Montessori follow self-directed play and believe children should learn from experiences and surroundings, however, Montessori follow a curriculum including math, language, and practical skills. Reggio Emilia follow a complete child directed approach, based on the children's current interests. (Goodwin University, 2015)

Why is it important for children to choose their own play? Role of the adult in children's play.

According to Nindirect (no date) children choosing their own play can have a positive impact on their development. Different unstructured play types can help develop physical and mental health. Freely chosen play is when a child has the opportunity to control their play using their own instincts, imagination and interests. Freely chosen

play is completely independent to the child with no interruption from adults and has no specific outcome. Free play gives children the chance to express themselves how they feel in the moment. Free play is important for children as they can become independent and creative with what they are deciding to play. By children choosing their own play, they are developing their problem-solving skills and beginning to risk asses' things independently. Early education (no date) explains that children need to take risks, they start by crawling, walking to then running. In the risk adverse society, lived in today, unfortunately the risk is being taken out of physical play making it a rare occurrence for children. Play is paramount for children's learning and development, through risky play they learn life skills and abilities, adults are holding them back by not letting them take risk and learn boundaries. The health and safety executive of early education says that the main goal is to weigh up the risks and benefits but not to eliminate the risk. How will children learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool?.

Aminpour, F., Bishop, K., and Corkery, L., (2019) explain the importance of self-directed play and how it should be intrinsically motivated and completely child led. During this type of play, children can create their own rules and outcomes for the play, this will encourage development in children's problem-solving skills, as they experience self-discovery and independence. Types of self- directed play includes physical play, cognitive play, and social play. A popular self- directed game amongst children is 'house' where the children create their own goal to the game. Self- directed play is fundamental to children's development and teaches them several different skills as they experience social engagement such as parallel play, onlooker play and cooperative play and may other developmental skills that can be used through child led play.

Adults can support and encourage children to engage in free play by providing a safe space for them to play In- by eliminating risks and hazards from their environment, they will be able to play and express themselves completely independently without being adult led. (UNICEF, no date). Daly, Byers, and Taylor (2004) explain that at childcare settings, it is he managers responsibility to ensure all staff understand their roles and can facilitate and support a variety of different plays. Practitioners should understand where physical support is needed, when they should encourage children

during tasks, when to ask questions, when to make suggestions and when their support is not needed. Clybiau Plant Play work principle 2 says that the process of play should be personally directed, freely chosen, and motivated intrinsically. Children should control the intent and content of their play; they should be free to follow their own ideas and instincts purely for their own purpose. The stages of the play cycle include:

- Pre-cues- an innate desire or decision that comes before the play.
- Cues- invitation to play which could be a gesture, verbal invite, body movement, showing of an object or simply a look.
- Return- a response to the cue.
- Frames- an invisible boundary containing the play.
- Flow- the flow and continuation of the play.
- Annihilation- play brought to a natural end by the child.
- Adulteration- adults intervening and ruining the child's play.
- Dysplay- a child acting out when nobody returns their cues.

Sturrock, G. and Else, P. (1998) developed the play cycle theory as a support for play workers to provide a theoretical description of the process of children's play. The 'Colorado paper' includes a role of the adult in four stages: play maintenance, simple involvement, medical intervention, and complex intervention. It is advised that playworkers should reflect upon the play cycle to understand when their involvement is required.

Kourti, A. Stavridou, A. Et al. explain the affects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on children's play behaviours. They state play is a vital part of their healthy psychological, emotional, social, and cognitive development. However, children's play has been affected during the pandemic, in terms of the time children have had to play and the characterises of their play. The study states that outdoor play was limited, while indoor play and screen- time has increased. Concern was stated that children's play habits have been affected since the pandemic, where more research is required on the situation.

Observation methods for young children

by observing children in the early years, it helps adults understand the strengths and needs of each child. By observing everyone, practitioners can gain an understanding of the child's knowledge, needs, interests, skills and how they learn best. (kids@Churchill Park, 2018) observations can be carried out both formally and informally, observations should be taken regularly to ensure the children are at the centre of the practice and everyone's need are met. (West Sussex County council, 2021)

different types of observation methods used include foundation phase profile observations, schedule of growing skills, strengths and difficulties questionnaires, Leuven scale, movement tracker, interaction tracker and running record.

Schedule of growing skills observation method gives a reliable insight of a child's developmental stage, strengths, and potential delays, it allows practitioners or professionals to gather the Information they need to give feedback within an hour and give an indication whether a referral should be made in the best interest of the child. This observation method uses nine key areas to measure the child's development, these are:

- passive posture- a body's natural resting position and when the person feels at ease.
- active posture- when the person is controlling their muscles in a certain position.
- Locomotor- physical action to get someone from one place to another, such as walking or running.
- Manipulative- the ability to handle an object with control.
- Visual- the ability to visually follow an object, looking at one object to another or looking at a single object.
- hearing and language- ability to hear and respond soft voices and show an understanding of the language.
- speech and language- ability to vocalise and communicating through speech.
- interactive social – a person's response and actions in an environment.
- self-care social- the ability for a person to help themselves.

The SOGS assessment forms can be used for four assessments, enabling the practitioners or professionals to see the child's progress over time. This observation method is typically used within the age range of 0-5 years. (GL assessment, no date). Developmental observations are important to use if there are any concerns of developmental delay where children are not meeting their expected milestones. Williams, E.M. and Hutchings, J. *et al.*, (2013) state concerns that in the UK 3% of school children are diagnosed with special educational needs, of which a large number with mild learning difficulties are not detected before they start school. They also stress the importance of detecting these additional learning needs early on as early intervention can be greatly beneficial for the child. SOGS were originally intended for use in the national childhood encephalopathy study in the 1970's, for children aged between 2- 3 years of age. The age range was later modified from birth to five years of age. The SOGS observation method was revised in 1996 where some aspects were changed. The standardisation of the SOGS were taken out in England and Wales with 348 children altogether, covering the complete age range. This observation method was proven to be reliable.

The SOGS is not a diagnosis tool but is used for accurate representations of the child's current developmental stages and can give indicators on the child's diagnosis. The SOGS record form consists of four pages with nine components of skills. The record form is highly structured and can be used Informally on a day-to-day basis when the practitioner is familiar with the format and how it is used. When using the SOGS observation method in practice, practitioners must have necessary equipment to hand. Firstly, the child must be made to feel comfortable in the environment the observation is being taken, this can be done with a use of toys and activities the child enjoys. It does not matter what order the nine skills on the form are met in. Regularly, practitioners find that not all nine skills cover the child's age range, so they may not all be met. Each skill area is made up of skill sets, to complete one skill at least two of the skill sets must be used to receive a clear result. Each skill set can be met to the most advanced which has been marked in the response column, if the practitioner feels that a child's performance was poor, any concerns must be written down to give the practitioner more insight and understanding. If concerned, the letter 'Q' can be marked in the column section to be marked as an area of concern and later discussed

and possibly referred. To mark the overall score for each skill, the practitioner must add the highest scores from the skill sets. This will give practitioners an overall indicator of the child's development and can benefit children who are not meeting their developmental targets as this is an opportunity for professionals to recognise them and offer the help and support they need. (Bellman, M. Lingam, s. and Aukett, A. 1996)

The role of play when undertaking observations and assessments of children. How does this affect the child's engagement and the accuracy of the observation?

As children play, they begin to feel more confident and happier with their surroundings as play is what they are familiar with. By them engaging in play activities provided, they can express themselves verbally and non-verbally. Through play, children can show their creativity and imagination. Play also helps develop social skills where they play with others, and learn to collaborate and communicate with others, physical development from running and jumping, play can help children express their emotions and build relationships by interacting and communicating with children or adults. It is useful for practitioners to observe children when playing, as they can gather an understanding of each child's needs and interests, through this, practitioners can create a curriculum around these specific interests and abilities, having a positive effect on their development and learning. (Louis, A. 2018).

Observing children is important for the future assessment and planning cycles and encourages practitioners to reflect. As practitioners observe, they should be watching children's actions, expressions, gestures, behaviours and listening to how they interact. Practitioners must be responsive when seeing children play and take the time to observe them playing when they have the opportunity. By observing children Naturally, while they are calm and happy, practitioners can see a real picture of their leaning. When the practitioner observes a child whilst playing, some observations may be short and brief, however if more observations are taken out while the child naturally plays, the practitioner may be able to observe for longer as the child may be showing different aspects of their leaning, such as playing with others. The goal of practitioners doing this is to ensure the curriculum is completely child led with a focus on what they enjoy doing and what developmental stage each child is at in the current time, so they can encourage their progression. (Drake, J. 2006)

Play-based observations can be beneficial to children and young people, with a range of ages, abilities and needs. Play based observations may be useful for somebody who is pre-verbal, has low language abilities, not fluent in primarily spoken language, has experienced trauma, struggles to put feelings into words or has mental health difficulties. When undertaking assessments through play, practitioners or professionals may gain an understanding of the individuals strengths, needs, personal approaches and identified emotional characters. The person undertaking the assessment can see how the individual plays when they are alone and when others join in. different types of assessments can be used, such as symbolic play test, schedule of growing skills and Bayley. (hsr 2017)

According to Mcinnes, K., Howard, J. *et al.*, (2013) the definition of play should be based on the child's perspective. It is explained that when children play, they use cues from their environment such as adult presence which may interrupt the play as they may be less likely to interact or play in the presence of an adult. This shows the benefits of observing children while doing something completely child led as an alternative to set activities with specific adult led outcomes.

References

Aminpour, F., bishop, K., and Corkery, L. (2019) *the hidden value of in-between spaces for children's self-directed play within outdoor school environments*. Landscape and urban planning: ELSEVIER. University of new south Wales: Australia.

Bellman, M. Lingam, s. and Aukett, a. (1996) *schedule of growing skills II. User's guide*. GL assessment.

Borttril, G. (2018) *can I go and play now?* Rethinking the early years. London: sage.

Clybiau Plant (no date) *Transition into play*.

Daly, M. Byers, E. and Taylor, W. (2004) *Early Years Management in practice*. Heinemann Educational Publishers: Oxford.

Student number- 2107710
Module code- ECEY4003/C
Word count- 3155

Drake, J. (2006) *observing children*. Nursery World. Available at: <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/observing-children> (accessed: 19 February 2022)

Educational play care, (2016) *why sensory play is important for development*. Available at: <https://www.educationalplaycare.com/blog/sensory-play-important-development/#:~:text= Sensory%20play%20supports%20language%20development%2C%20cognitive%20growth%2C%20fine,children%20learn%20sensory%20attributes%20%28hot%2C%20cold%2C%20sticky%2C%20dry%29> (Accessed: 12 February 2022)

Gascoyne, S. (2016) *Sensory play: Play in the EYFS* (Vol. 1). Andrews UK Limited
GL assessment (no date) *schedule of growing skills*. Available at: <https://www.gl-assessment.co.uk/assessments/products/schedule-of-growing-skills/> (accessed: 18 February 2022)

Goodwin university (2015) *Reggio Emilia vs. Montessori: which is right for your child?* Available at: <https://www.goodwin.edu/enews/reggio-emilia-vs-montessori/> (accessed: 15 February 2022)

Hsr (2017) *play-based assessments*. Available at: <https://www.hsrpsychology.co.uk/services/specific-assessments/other-assessments/play-based-assessment/> (accessed: 18 February 2022)

Huleatt, H. (2012) *heuristic play*. Community play things.

Kids@ Churchill park Blog (2018) *why observation is important?*. Available at: <https://www.churchillpark.ca/why-observation-is-important/> (accessed: 17 February 2022)

Kourti, A. Stavridou, A. Et al,. (2021) *Play Behaviours in Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A review of the literature*.

Louis, A. (2018) *why observe children at play?* Early childhood education blog. Available at: <https://www.himama.com/blog/why-observe-children-at-play/> (accessed: 18 February 2022)

Student number- 2107710
Module code- ECEY4003/C
Word count- 3155

Mcilroy, T. (2022) *10 benefits of sensory play in early childhood. Empowered parents.* Available at: <https://empoweredparents.co/benefits-of-sensory-play/> (accessed: 19 February 2022)

McInnes, K., Howard, J. et al., (2013) *the nature of adult-child interaction in the early year's classroom: implications for children's perceptions of play and subsequent learning behaviour.* European early childhood education research journal: Routledge.

National Day Nurseries Association, (2017) *Your essential pocket guide to Open-Ended Play Ideas.* UK: NDNA.

nidirect (no date) *how play helps children's development.* Available at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/how-play-helps-childrens-development#:~:text=Freely%20chosen%20play%20is%20when%20a%20child%20decides,chosen%20play%20improves%20children%E2%80%99s%20health%2C%20well-being%20and%20development.> (accessed: 14 February 2022)

SOFT surfaces (no date) *learning through play psychology and theories.* Available at: <https://www.softsurfaces.co.uk/learning-through-play-psychology-and-theories/> (accessed: 19 February 2022)

Sturrock, G. and Else, P. (1998) *the Colorado paper- the playground as therapeutic space*

Thrones, N (2001) *babies and young children.* Diploma in childcare and education. Delta Place: Cheltenham.

Tiny happy people, (no Date) *what is sensory play? And why is it great for your child's development?* Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people/what-is-sensory-play/z6whxbk> (accessed: 11 February 2022)

UNICEF (no date) *what is free play and why should you encourage it at home?* Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/parenting/child-care/what-is-free-play> (accessed: 14 February 2022)

Walker, M. (no date) *Children's care, learning and development.* NVQ 3 Candidate handbook. City & Guilds.

Student number- 2107710
Module code- ECEY4003/C
Word count- 3155

West Sussex county council (2021) *effective practice: observation, assessment and planning*. West Sussex. Available at:

https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/media/5555/effective_poa_and_planning.pdf

(accessed: 17 February 2022)

Williams, E, M. and Hutchings, J. *et al.*, (2013) *schedule of growing skills II: pilot study of an alternative scoring method*. Psychology.