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I used the prompt:

1. What are the Welsh curriculum guidelines for play right now?

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work

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Charlie Burman

2417241

1099 words

Literature Review: The Role of Play in Toddlers' Cognitive Development.

Particularly in the early years, play is an essential component of children's learning and development. Play gives children vital chances to experiment, explore, and make sense of the world around them (Ministerial Review of Play). Play is acknowledged as a crucial learning tool in both the Curriculum for Wales and the Welsh Curriculum for

supported non-maintained childcare settings. By fostering independence and creativity, it promotes the child's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development (Gov.Wales, 2023). Play is a key element of Wales' Curriculum for Wales (2022). It promotes the four aims by helping children. Both child-initiated and adult-supported play are crucial to learning and development. Recent research by Pyle et al. (2024) also found that guided play supports early literacy development, aligning with the Welsh Curriculum's vision for children to become ambitious, capable learners who use language creatively and purposefully.

The purpose of this review is to survey current research on how play supports cognitive development in toddlers, to consider theoretical perspectives (e.g. Piaget, Vygotsky), identify gaps and debates, and to argue why further research is needed.

The idea that play is crucial for the development of self-regulation, executive function, symbolic thinking, and communication skills is supported by current research. For instance, observational and experimental studies conducted in Foundation Stage settings by Whitebread, Coltman, Jameson, Lander et al. (2009) demonstrate a high correlation between metacognitive practices and self-regulated learning and symbolic play. Research investigated the effects of maternal scaffolding on play in children aged 12 to 24 months. Neale and Whitebread (2019) discovered that when carers supervise play, toddlers show more control.

According to the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), play-based learning improves learning outcomes, especially in early literacy, language, and numeracy, in a positive way, with an average of adding around 4 months of progress. However, rather than completely free play, a large portion of the evidence concentrates on practitioner-led or adult-involved play. Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels (2017) conducted an analysis of 168 papers on play-based pedagogies for young children aged 4-5 worldwide and discovered widespread support for play as a tool for academic and developmental learning. However, they also pointed out that concepts and practices in play-based teaching are not widely agreed upon.

According to Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Children develop in stages. They go from exploring through physical manipulation to symbolic thinking throughout these early stages. Piaget made a distinction between a number of play styles.

According to Lev Vygotsky's theory, social interaction and scaffolding, guided assistance is essential for cognitive development. children internalise expectations, language and other aspects of play, particularly pretend or guided play. (ZPD). Bruner and more recent scholars of self-regulation and metacognition are other significant theorists that support this. Theories explain why certain forms of play weather that is guided, symbolic, and sociodramatic are cognitive engines rather than merely enjoyable activities. (WJEC, n.d.)

Guided play, according to research, this works especially well for cognitive gains. For instance, directed play supports early literacy as demonstrated in "Supporting literacy development in kindergarten through teacher-facilitated play" (Pyle et al., 2024). Other forms of constructive play, particularly when supervised, aid with problem solving and spatial reasoning.

Implementation in UK EYFS settings involves achieving a balance. According to the EYFS framework (2021), environments must specifically encourage play, both indoors and outdoors, and involve adult engagement.

It is thought that some structure is required for the desired outcomes, while others contend that excessive control diminishes curiosity. Pyle and Danniels' (2017) work on a continuum of play-based learning emphasises teachers' apprehension about "hijacking" play when they become overly directive.

According to EEF, guided play typically demonstrates more evidence of cognitive advances. Age differences are a big part of this study, since symbolic or pretend play are still developing, the effects appear to be more pronounced or obvious in older toddlers than in very young toddlers (12–24 months). Neale and Whitebread (2019)

demonstrate that scaffolded object play improves effortful control in babies as young as 12 to 24 months.

According to some studies, practitioners are pushed towards more direct instruction by curriculum and evaluation requirements. (Melasalmi et al., 2023) Pyle, Danniels & colleagues point out challenges in play contexts, teachers find play “less structured and difficult to plan” and sometimes feel uncertain how to use guided play.

According to some data (from 'Getting it Right from the Start', GOV.UK), practitioners acknowledge the importance of play but find it difficult to incorporate this into regular practice.

Several studies use ages 3-5 rather than 1-3. Physical play has been studied, although not as thoroughly for toddlers in environments. More ongoing study is required to determine the impact on toddlers.

As children investigate and make sense of the world, it celebrates their independence, curiosity, and feeling of agency. It also fosters critical lifelong learning abilities. (HWB, 2019)

There is evidence that higher results are in settings with plenty of resources, skilled practitioners, and both indoor and outdoor facilities. (Sylva+ et al., 2023) There is no "best" type of play, however, when paired with adult scaffolding benefits for the child are more likely.

The Welsh Curriculum's goal of creating self-reliant, self-assured learners is supported by the evidence that suggests symbolic and directed play enhances metacognitive abilities (Whitebread et al., 2009). The curriculum's emphasis on relationships, emotional development, and well-being is reflected in the way that maternal scaffolding during play aids in the development of executive function and effortful control in toddlers (Neale & Whitebread, 2019).

Some research highlights limitations. Inconsistent practitioner understanding can lessen the influence of guided play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). According to other research, children's creativity and skills may be restricted by excessive adult supervision during play (Weisberg et al., 2016). The emphasis on child-led inquiry within the Areas of Learning and Experience in the Welsh Curriculum stands in contrast to this. There are also worries that assessing results from play-based learning can be difficult (Bennett et al., 2020).

In conclusion, studies confirm that play is an essential part of toddlers' cognitive development and the effectiveness of certain play styles can be explained by theoretical frameworks. Majority of research indicates that adult engagement boosts benefits. There are some obvious gaps, though, such as the relative lack of thorough research on toddlers (ages 1-3), as well as the lack of knowledge about how practitioners carry out play in real-world situations, particularly when faced with demands. More research is needed to outline the kinds of play that benefit toddlers. In hopes to create standards of excellence for supervised play with children and to provide guidance for training and policy to assist.

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Methodological considerations – play supporting cognitive development in toddlers

Toddler cognitive development is a fascinating subject with lots of room for investigation and comprehension of early learning mechanisms. Play is a particularly important component among the many elements affecting this crucial stage. The purpose of this essay is to examine the methodological issues that arise while researching how play contributes in toddlers' cognitive development. This study examines how play fosters cognitive growth in toddlers by combining naturalistic observations with interviews of parents and educators. Observations capture genuine, spontaneous play behaviours—such as exploration, problem-solving, and concentration—in real-world settings, providing direct insight into early cognitive processes (Palaiologou, 2016). Interviews with adults who regularly interact with the children then offer contextual perspectives on each child's play patterns and developmental milestones across different environments (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). By integrating these two approaches, the research achieves methodological triangulation, strengthening the validity and richness of its findings through the convergence of qualitative insights and behavioural data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). This mixed-methods design is both developmentally appropriate

and ethically sound, and it captures the complex ways in which play contributes to cognitive development during early childhood.

A purposive sample of twelve toddlers aged 18 to 36 months was drawn from two nearby early years settings. This sampling method was selected to intentionally include children who exemplify the developmental stage under study (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). It is well suited to small-scale early childhood investigations, where participant availability is limited and ethical guidelines rule out random selection (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). The chosen toddlers, who attended play-focused settings, reflected typical characteristics of their age group. Parental consent and practitioner cooperation were secured before any data collection commenced. Alongside observing the children, semi-structured interviews with both parents and practitioners were conducted to capture diverse viewpoints on each child's play behaviour and cognitive development. Involving both groups enriched the insights into how play fosters growth in home and educational contexts, while preserving an ethically sound, manageable sample size for deep qualitative analysis (Denscombe, 2014).

I chose to use a small group of children as the subject of this research project because it is easier to collect more thorough and in-depth data with a smaller group. This makes it possible to gain deeper understanding of the experiences, actions, and thought processes of every child, as well as it is easier to manage time, resources, and logistics with smaller samples. After reading a few case studies I found that smaller sample studies like *A Young Child's Perspectives on Outdoor Play* (Beattie, 2015) had more in-depth and significant information gathered. It is simpler to plan observations, carry out interviews, and handle data.

Employing observational methods offers a powerful way to study how play nurtures toddlers' cognitive growth by capturing authentic, in-the-moment evidence of their behaviour. Watching children at play reveals spontaneous interactions, curiosity, and

problem-solving tactics that indirect approaches like interviews or surveys fail to uncover (Palaiologou, 2016). Since toddlers often lack the verbal ability to explain their reasoning (Whitebread, 2012), direct observation becomes especially valuable. Gathering data within their usual play settings also enhances ecological validity, ensuring behaviours are natural rather than staged (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Moreover, using structured observation protocols promotes consistency and reliability while preserving rich qualitative detail (Robson & McCartan, 2016). It is possible to make observations throughout time, which offers continuous insights into how toddlers' play patterns and cognitive abilities change as they grow. This reveals developmental paths and the lasting effects of play. A non-intrusive technique that has little effect on child behaviour is observation. Naturalistic observations, as opposed to experimental ones, let children play without feeling forced or unnatural.

It is very beneficial to include parent and teacher interviews in this study since these adults offer insightful contextual information about the child's play and learning experiences in various settings. Regular observations by parents and professionals can provide longitudinal viewpoints that a researcher would miss during brief observation sessions (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). Their perspectives enhance our knowledge of how cognitive skills develop and are supported in early childhood settings as well as at home by pointing out patterns in behaviour, developmental progress, and responses to play activities (Aubrey et al., 2000). According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), semi-structured interviews provide freedom in exploring important topics while ensuring uniformity among participants. By eliciting in-depth, candid feedback, this method not only elaborates on observational insights but also bolsters data credibility through methodological triangulation (Denscombe, 2014). Engaging parents and practitioners alongside observations bridges the gap between seen play behaviours and adult interpretations, offering a richer view of toddlers' cognitive growth through play. Caregivers and teachers supply crucial context, such as favoured play activities, social interactions, and any obstacles encountered, that observations alone might overlook. In combining interviews with

observational techniques, researchers gain a more comprehensive understanding of children's play experiences and their cognitive development.

While parent and teacher interviews and observations are both useful tools for examining toddlers' play and cognitive development, it is important to recognise the limitations of each approach. The possibility of observer bias, in which the researcher's expectations or interpretations may affect what is recorded, is a significant difficulty while making observations (Palaiologou, 2016). Additionally, according to the Hawthorne effect, children's behaviour may alter if they are aware that they are being watched, which lessens the authenticity of the data gathered (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Furthermore, observations might take a lot of time and only record a small portion of behaviour, which means that important facets of cognitive development may be overlooked (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018).

Interviews with parents and teachers can be shaped by subjective bias and the urge to give socially desirable answers, leading participants to unintentionally tell researchers what they think they want to hear (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). Personal beliefs, experiences, or levels of child-development knowledge may also cause varied interpretations of play among parents and professionals (Aubrey et al., 2000). Furthermore, interviews depend on participants' recollections and self-reports, which do not always accurately mirror a child's true behaviour (Denscombe, 2014). These limitations underscore the value of combining interviews with observations: triangulating self-reported responses against observational data helps offset individual biases and bolsters the overall validity and reliability of the results (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018).

In this study, triangulation involves integrating direct observations with interviews of parents and teachers to examine how play fosters toddlers' cognitive development. Observations deliver firsthand evidence of children's behavior during play, while interviews supply contextualized insights from the adults who know them best (Denscombe, 2014). By cross-verifying data from both sources, the researcher can pinpoint consistent trends and mitigate the biases or shortcomings of any single

method (Flick, 2018). This approach is especially vital in early childhood research, where young children's actions and developmental pathways are complex and shaped by multiple environments. As a result, triangulation strengthens the study's credibility and richness, producing a fuller, more accurate picture of play's role in promoting cognitive growth in toddlers.

Combining direct observations with interviews of parents and teachers establishes a comprehensive research design that offers both empirical and interpretive insights into how play fosters toddlers' cognitive development. Observations capture children's spontaneous interactions, revealing in-the-moment evidence of abilities like problem-solving, memory recall, and curiosity (Palaiologou, 2016). At the same time, conversations with caregivers and educators illuminate the reasons behind these behaviors and their ties to developmental milestones over time (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). Combining these two approaches gives the study access to contextual knowledge from adults who are familiar with the children as well as first-hand behavioural data. By comparing and cross-checking data from many sources for consistency, triangulation enhances the validity of the results (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018). Overall, by resolving each other's shortcomings and providing a more comprehensive and reliable knowledge of how play promotes early cognitive development, the two approaches enhance one another.

Despite their consideration, questionnaires were eventually rejected due to their limited ability to provide insight into the complex and dynamic nature of toddler play. These technologies usually produce quantitative or surface-level data, which could lead to the loss of the complex, context-rich understanding needed to comprehend the play behaviours of young children (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018). Additionally, they rely on participants' reading comprehension and accurate responses to predetermined items, which limits the breadth and depth of their responses (Denscombe, 2014). By hiding individual differences among children or

families, this structure can further reduce data richness and dependability in a small-scale study (Mukherji and Albon, 2018).

In conclusion, a strong, complementary approach to investigating how play promotes cognitive development in toddlers is produced by fusing systematic observations with parent and teacher interviews. While interviews offer deep contextual viewpoints from people who know the children the best, direct observation records the children's unplanned play behaviours. Triangulation is made possible by this dual technique, which combines objective data with interpretive insights to increase the findings' depth and trustworthiness. For a small-scale early years examination, a purposive sample of twelve toddlers maintains the study ethically sound, manageable, and focused. Experiments and surveys were not included since they would have limited the data's authenticity, depth, and developmental sensitivity.

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In order to guarantee that participants in this study involving young children are treated with dignity, equity, and compassion, ethical concerns are crucial.

Observations and teacher interviews are used in my study to examine how play enhances toddlers' cognitive development. Concerns including informed consent, confidentiality, safeguarding, and researcher duty must be carefully considered.

Parents and practitioners must be properly informed about the research's goal and

methodology because the participants are very young and incapable of giving their own informed permission. (Ukri.org, 2024) In addition to safeguarding participants, ethical practice maintains the validity and integrity of the research.(Unicef ,2013)

I will acquire the parents or guardians of each child participating in the study's informed consent before making any observations. An information sheet outlining the goal of the study, the nature of the observations, and the intended use of the data will be provided in order to do this. (NSPCC, 2023) Parents can withdraw their child from the study at any time without facing any repercussions, and they will be reassured that participation is entirely optional. To verify their acceptance, written consent papers will subsequently be gathered. I'll also make sure parents are aware that the observations will be centred on play-based learning rather than individual performance or evaluation to maintain transparency.(L. Arnott and others, 2020)

In addition to parental consent, Briggs (2019) points out that in educational research with teachers, it is essential that participation is truly voluntary, that consent is informed, and that confidentiality and anonymity of participants and their settings are secured. Informed consent will be provided by the teachers who take part in the interviews. Before the interviews, I will provide each instructor with a document of information that explains the purpose of the study, the types of questions that will be asked, and how their responses will be used. Teachers will be informed that their involvement in the study is completely optional and that they are able to withdraw at any time or choose not to answer any specific questions. Consent forms will then be signed to confirm their understanding and involvement. Furthermore, I will ensure participants that neither their identities or the names of their settings will be disclosed in any published reports or findings. (Husband, 2020)

The information sheet will thoroughly explain each aspect of the study in a straightforward manner to guarantee transparency. It will outline the precise procedures for observations and teacher interviews as well as the research goal, which is to investigate how play promotes toddlers' cognitive development.(Lyndon, H. and Gaywood, D., 2025) Parents will be informed about the duration of the observations, the kinds of activities that will be seen, and the fact that no children will

be identified or evaluated on an individual basis. The document will also contain information on who will have access to the data, how it will be safely stored, and how results will be disseminated. This kind of openness and transparency helps parents make an informed choice about their child's involvement.(R.O. Gilmore et al., 2020)

Despite the low risk of the teacher interviews, it is important to recognise any potential ethical issues. Teachers may find it difficult or uncomfortable to discuss their teaching strategies, especially when the questions centre on how they support children's intellectual growth through play. There's no guarantee that they would feel assessed or worry that their responses might be revealed to their manager or colleagues. I will create a relaxed and supportive interview environment, stressing that there are no right or wrong responses, in order to reduce these dangers. I'll remind participants that their responses will be kept private, that all written materials will use aliases, and that they can withdraw from the activity at any moment without facing any consequences. (Meepring, S. and Tulyakul, P., 2020)

I will make sure the teachers taking part in the interviews feel comfortable, appreciated, and empowered throughout the process in order to reduce any possible hazards. I will go over the research goals, the types of questions that will be asked, and the fact that participants can choose not to answer any questions in detail before the interview. Ahu.lu.se (2024) I will remain compassionate and professional throughout the interview, avoiding any language that could make participants feel judged or condemned. I will ensure that all responses are kept confidential and securely archived after the interview. The records will not contain any personally identifiable information, and findings will be presented under anonymous names.

Even while watching children play is a low-risk approach, there are still certain moral issues to be mindful of. If children know they are being watched, they might act differently or feel uneasy, which could interfere with their normal play and development. If any worries regarding a child's welfare surface during the observation, there is also a safeguarding risk. Furthermore, there is a slight privacy risk if the children's identities are disclosed in written conclusions or if information about them is not kept private. It is crucial that the participants' rights and wellbeing

are always given priority because they are very young and incapable of giving their own informed permission. (G. Askari, 2024) Given I have parental consent, I will still be cautious and stop if i see any child uneasy or uncomfortable. To reduce potential risks to the children during observations, I will ensure that all research is carried out in a safe, familiar, and supportive environment.

In order to avoid disturbing the children's routines and to ensure their comfort, observations will be made during regular play activities. In order to prevent influencing their behaviour or making them feel self-conscious, I shall be as discrete as possible. To avoid making any child feel singled out, all observations will centre on group play and learning rather than individual evaluation. All information will be safely saved, and children's identities will not be included in any notes or reports to preserve confidentiality. I will adhere to the setting's safeguarding policy and notify the authorised safeguarding lead right away if any safeguarding issues surface. These steps will contribute to the protection, respect, and ethical observation of children.

Even while there isn't much risk to me as the researcher, there are still a few things to think about. Maintaining professional boundaries, handling sensitive data, and handling emotional situations. If safeguarding concerns show up, i will need to consider if they are some of the difficulties that come with doing observations and interviews in an early childhood context. Additionally, there is a chance that my personal opinions or expectations will inadvertently affect how I interpret the data, which is known as researcher bias.(J. Larsson, 2021)

I will always abide by the setting's policies and procedures, especially those regarding confidentiality and safeguarding, in order to lower these risks. I will make sure that all data is handled securely and keep a professional distance from participants. I will keep an objective journal, refrain from passing judgement on others, and consider my own involvement in order to minimise prejudice.(Feeney, Freeman and Moravcik, 2020) I may contribute to ensuring my safety, professionalism, and the study's general dependability by taking these actions.

The university that is in charge of the research could also be at jeopardy. The university's reputation and credibility as a research institution may suffer if ethical standards are not appropriately maintained, such as when consent forms are not obtained or confidentiality is violated. Additionally, the institution has an obligation to make sure that all research involving minors complies with data protection and safeguarding regulations. If these requirements are not met, there may be complaints, legal problems, or a decline in trust from associated early childhood settings.

The research will be conducted in complete accordance with the university's safeguarding policies and ethical approval procedures in order to lower these risks. All participant interactions, data storage practices, and permission forms must comply to institutional policies and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). In order to guarantee that the study is carried out ethically and positively for the institution, the research supervisor will also supervise the procedure. (BERA, 2024)

I will make sure that all information gathered for the study is handled legally, equitably, and securely in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018). Any data gathered from child observations or teacher interviews will be anonymised to prevent personal identification. Data shall be kept in closed physical folders and, if necessary, password-protected digital files. This data will only be accessible to my research supervisor and me. Participants will receive information about their data rights, including how their data will be used, saved, and then removed at the end of the study. These steps will guarantee complete adherence to data protection regulations and contribute to preserving the confidentiality and confidence of all research participants. Only my research supervisor and I will have access to the data, which will be completely erased after the study is over. According to the most recent data protection laws, these protocols guarantee the privacy of every participant. (GDPR, 2018)

All things considered, these ethical procedures guarantee that the study is carried out in a responsible manner, that participants are safeguarded and valued and that the results are trustworthy. Transparency, confidentiality, and participant welfare are

given top priority in this study, which shows a dedication to high ethical standards at every level of the research process.

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