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Understanding the Importance of Play and Observation in Early Years.

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I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research
and creation of this assignment.

According to Walters (2022), play does not look the same for everyone. Play differs from one child to the next, as children base their life choices on first-hand experiences. Adults can contribute to play; however, adults must understand the importance of play and how to enhance play so that play does not negatively impact adult involvement. The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland (no date), agrees that the role of an adult is to stimulate and support children's play based on article 31, that children have the right to play.

Else (2014) states play is a vital factor in children's lives because play helps develop a child's brain and allows strong links to be made, however not only does play help cognitively but also physically. Physical play encourages the body to learn control and studies have shown that being physical in the early years of life decreases the chances of obesity later on. Play Scotland (no date) states physical play to be children using larger movements such as running, jumping or climbing.

Play Scotland (no date) describes multiple types of play in which children can learn and develop life skills. One type of play is creative play, which is a visual type of play where children make new connections. In fantasy play, children engage to act out a version of the world they want. Health Service Executive [HSE] (2022) agrees that fantasy play is a great type of play as it encourages communication, imagination and socialising within play. HSE describes social play as a child developing skills to function around others and incorporating them in their play by taking turns and encouraging communication between children.

Queen Margaret University (2023) believes that a holistic approach to play is important because play has different ranges that help a child develop. The adults that help facilitate children's play should allow the play to be open and child-led, leaving children to develop their imagination skills to create their ideas so that the play has a deeper meaning and more engagement.

Physical play includes the use of gross and fine motor skills. Over a child's life and experience with play, these skills will grow alongside the child opening more physical play options. A child will start their physical interactions with reaching out, tummy time sensory play and as a child grows this will turn into running and jumping. These

develop their strength, balance, coordination and mental health (Department For Education, No date).

Play world (no date) states physical play can be accessed by children who know where their surroundings are so that they can freely play. Adults can provide children with an outdoor space where they have obstacles to strengthen and encourage gross motor skills. Adults can support play by setting out various tools, however, allow the child to follow their interests so they can have a more fulfilled play without interference.

Early Years Resources (2018) states children have multiple benefits from physical play. Physical play health keeps the brain active when children are moving blood flow is pumping supporting brain concentration and memory. Children interact and play alongside others; this then supports social anxiety as children are exposed to socialising on their terms and in a comfortable environment. Additionally, children's mental health can be supported through physical play, by playing children are exercising in a positive light, thus making exercise and a healthy lifestyle easier in later life keeping a positive mentality and a positive way to release stress.

To support physical play children also have access to outdoor play. Outdoor play is built up of accessing nature, mud, water and tools to play outside. Outdoor play supports social development by children working together or alongside to learn from one another, this may look like children using construction tools like sand or wood to build or working as a team playing on the swing (Creative Play, 2025).

The benefits of outdoor play offers space for children to express themselves through movement and risk, testing and experimenting in the surroundings. Another benefit is having a rich sensory experience through water or mud play, testing what sensory opportunities they can find in nature individually, and, being able to share and teach this experience with peers (Tovey, no date).

Morgan (no date) discusses how Froebel and Montessori play a huge part in their theories of how physical and outdoor play in nature enriches children to holistically develop and enhance their learning in the natural world. Caldwell (2009) states how Montessori's theory helped children develop and learn through practical life

experiences, such as being in a garden or outdoor setting where they can learn through growing vegetables or being able to explore their senses in nature to allow children to recognise responsibility of life and understanding of how nature works.

Children can develop skills holistically through physical and outdoor play.

Parten's stages of play indicate at what stage children should be using these types of play. There are six stages to this theory, the first being unoccupied play, where a child will sit back and watch the world. The second stage, this stage is when children play alone and are content with only what they choose to play with. The third stage is the onlooker stage, this is where a child will show interest and enjoyment in other play and express themselves socially. The fourth stage is parallel play where children play alongside one another but have different goals or outcomes to their play. The fifth stage is associate play where children share what they are playing with but are not playing together and again have a different end goal. The sixth stage is cooperative play, this stage is the most social stage where children play with one another in the same game with the same rules (Explorations Early Learning, 2020).

Play For Wales (2022) states Self-directed play is when children engage in play and offer the opportunity of endless goals without any pressure from adults. Self-directed play can only be achieved when children fully create their play with their own rules and instructions.

Amin (2022) states adults can support children to have self-directed play as it supports independence and initiative as they can choose how they want to play freely. Children leading their play with adult supervision can be a positive experience as this can help build social interactions and communication all through playing based on children's interests. Adults learn to wait and hold back when children are playing to allow them time to process challenges without pressure or judgement of adults, then if needed adults can step in when appropriate to support the children's needs.

Adults can support children in self-led play by asking or answering questions when appropriate. During child-led play children will experience awe and wonder of what they have facilitated around them, the adult can contribute to when the children have

questions to help them carry on in their state of play. Allowing children to have a fully self-directed experience can allow a child to play or choose resources they have never used before to discover their use or discover use within their play (Hopes and Dreams, 2024).

Leatherbarrow (2024) states adults should provide a range of materials and resources for children to have sensory experiences whether it is water, sand or slime the child should show interest at their own pace and within their own time. Adults should not put any sort of pressure or instruction on children as they will not see this as play, children should be allowed to explore the resources themselves to find their uses or build their imaginative ideas to create a play or solve a problem.

The Steiner Connection (2022) states self-directed play is an important part of play because research shows that if a child has enough experience with child-led play they will have a healthy childhood and healthy relationship between adult and child. Children develop an understanding of one another during play such as turn-taking, initiative and learning how to work through conflict between themselves. They develop the ability to listen to one another and begin to understand and feel empathy for others and how that situation looks like for someone else. Children will begin to learn and gain understanding with cause and effect such as dropping a bouncy ball and it bounces back. Allowing children to learn and grow with their experiences, rather than rushing them to grow to society's standards. Steiner stated in his theory that the results of self-directed play will not be seen until later in life, leaving an adult to feel free and able to lead a free and open life.

Head Start (2019) describes observation as a form of documenting the way a child presents and behaves. This is a tool used by adults to assess how a child behaves socially, physically, and intellectually during play or any activity to gain an understanding how the child will react to what is presented to them. Birth to 5 matters (no date) Observation is a vital part of early years for practitioners and adults because this gives an idea of what a child understands and whether they have made any progress from the start. However, observation also plays a part in how adults

teach because if you are tracking progress and understanding and seeing a decline adults use this to adjust their teaching and methods to better support children.

According to Twinkl (no date), a photo observation is an in-the-moment glimpse into a child's play or activity. This method of observation gives a visual snapshot rather than having to write down notes or remember everything from memory. Not only can a photo capture progress to compare to another picture or video like children practising jumping or catching it can also track improved mark-making skills to compare to previous activities. Photographs can track in-the-moment emotions and body language to see the engagement and how well the child is interested in the activity. Photographs and videos are great for progress trackers but also for parent involvement to see regularly what children do throughout the day.

University of Plymouth (2023) states there are pros to using photos for observations such as during an activity taking photographs is a very quick method to capture evidence without disturbing the children or the activity too much, recording in the moment to capture exactly as the activity is playing out rather than reciting it at a later date. However, the cons to using photograph observations are taking a moment to find a device that could distract children and making the moment feel staged, and picking and choosing what to capture can be biased due to deciding what should be documented.

A holistic approach to photo observations would be to capture the entire moment rather than one snapshot to ensure that all the information is being used rather than a biased image of only one aspect of the play or activity. To see a holistic view of the child there would be more information needed to see the child's progress and development in all areas (Louis, 2022).

Birth to 5 Matters (no date) that using photographs and video observation to document evidence is a great visual record as you can revisit the moment and watch the behaviours and interactions displayed between children and adults. From this an adult can use this evidence to support children by shaping their planning so that it directly fits with individualised child needs, allowing children to develop holistically pinpointing the areas to enhance and develop further. Using this observation tool

also allows parents to have a snapshot of their child's experience and development over time. This collaboration is great for parents and practitioners because this builds a great rapport between adults and children including them in the assessment process, however, this helps to develop trust between adults, practitioners and children knowing they are being supported for their children.

However, there are some challenges to using photographs and videos to document children's play and progress as in a short clip you only can assess from what you see in the video, if any other skill is presented after the video or photograph that will not be documented. Another challenge may be children being uncomfortable being photographed and this then disrupts their play. This observation style will also require time of the adult or practitioner afterwards which depending on the ratio may not be achievable in a short period (University of Plymouth, 2023).

Louis, (2022) also states that observing and assessing children during their play is important because this will be a time when they show their most relaxed and authentic selves. To observe a child can be an invasive task so being able to have a child engaged in play where they feel most secure emotionally and physically will allow for a more accurate observation of their skills but also where children may lack skill, allowing adults to observe how a child communicates socially, any delays in speech or physically how they function.

Perera (2024) describes the Hawthorne effect to be when individuals feel they are being closely observed by their superiors they start to feel a sense of suspicion or lack of trust, this leads to a lower performance in work ethic or changes in behaviour.

Williams (date) states that the Hawthorne effect may affect how we take observations, if children suspect they are being watched or observed by an adult they will begin to act differently. This will then not only give an accurate observation of how the child presents during their play but also will affect the child's play as they will not engage if they feel they are being studied.

According to the Department of Education (2024), the framework for early years foundation stage adults should be giving multiple choice opportunities for children to play and adults utilise that time to make observations to fully understand that child's

interests and skills, from this, adults can shape their practise to suit the children's needs and interests to have better engagement in activities. Whitebread (2017) states that allowing children to play provides adults with a better understanding of what skills a child may know through natural, real-life experiences. This provides evidence of progress as it will be in everyday context making this regularly up to date and trustworthy.

Botrill (2018) suggests that adults should change their daily structure so that there is more flexibility to work with the children and their interests rather than have set literacy or numeracy tasks that interfere with children achieving an enriched play experience. The role of the adult is to take a step back and to listen to the children, understand the language they are using to express themselves to know when adult input can be integrated in. Adults must wait for their opportunity when children have their short break from playing, to use that time to introduce a skill or an idea they would like the children to achieve or build upon. To learn and gain knowledge from standing back and watching how children play, learning their interests and learning about the individual children will give adults a better view of how to intervene at the right times.

McInnes (2012) states that education policies and procedures aim to improve and maintain the healthy well-being of children. Studies found that children who saw a task as play were engaged and more deeply interested rather than when a child was presented with an activity not seen as play. From the study of a large group of children, they were able to pick up on the cues children were presenting when playing. From this tasks could be made and centred around the specifications of the child.

King (2021) states that the play cycle is an observation method centred around children during their play. The technique consists of documenting children's play via video so that it can be watched and studied later. Adults will stay back and not interfere with play allowing children to get a rich and deep experience within their play. Adults found the play cycle to capture real-time experiences and use later on to learn the children's play cues and emotions.

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