

Cover sheet

For this assignment I have submitted the following:

Component 1: Two types of play

Component 2: Why it is important for children to choose their own play and the importance of the role of the adult in children's play

Component 3: Cognitive and intellectual skills

Component 4: Practical skills

2927 words

AI statement: This assignment was completed without the use of AI. I confirm that all work submitted for this assignment is my own. I confirm that I have kept notes and draft versions of my work which can be provided if required.

Play is widely recognised within early years education as a vital part of young children's learning and development, as it gives them the opportunity to explore their interests, develop new skills and make sense of the world around them. Research suggests that play provides valuable opportunities for children to explore interests, solve problems and express creativity while supporting development across cognitive, social, emotional and physical domains (California Department of Education, 2020). In early years settings, play supports children's cognitive social, emotional, and physical development while also promoting independence and confidence. Practitioners play a significant role in creating environments that value play and support children's learning experiences. This section will explore two key types of play used within early years practice and discuss how these can be effectively supported to promote children's development and well being. Child led play refers to play that is chosen, directed and controlled by the child based on their own interests, ideas and experiences. This type of play is considered particularly important in early years practice as it allows children to take responsibility of their learning as well as develop independence and build confidence. According to Care Inspectorate, child led participation supports children's autonomy and confidence by enabling them to make choices and influences their learning experiences (Care Inspectorate, 2016). Through child led play, children can explore at their own pace, make decisions and engage in activities that are meaningful to them, which can lead to higher levels of motivation and sustained engagement. This is supported by research which suggests that play enables children to develop understanding through exploration and interaction, supporting learning across multiple areas of development (Griswold, 2018). The Institute of Education Sciences identified free play as a child directed and adaptable approach that encourages engagement and supports learning across a range of developmental areas, including cognitive, social and communication skills (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022). Research highlights that unstructured child led play allows children to engage with their environment in open ended ways, encouraging them to explore and make decisions independently without predetermined outcomes (Houser et al., 2016). When children initiate play, it is more likely that they will be more motivated and engaged, which enhances their cognitive development through problem solving activities and the use creative skills. The University of Cambridge reports that guided play, which combines child initiated activity with practitioner support can improve learning outcomes in comparison to adult led instruction (University of Cambridge, 2020). Research indicates that

“child initiated play gives children the freedom to select the activities they want and the chance to explore them for as long as they choose, which supports motivation, engagement, imagination and sustained attention” (Drew, 2023), reinforcing the idea that child led play promotes independence and deeper engagement in learning. While child led play emphasises on children’s choices, agency and independence, adult led play also has a key role within early years practice. Adult led play refers to the activities that are planned by practitioners and carers with specific learning intentions, whilst maintaining a playful approach to learning. Adult led play can be effective in supporting specific areas in a child’s development, such as communication and language, literacy, numeracy, and physical development. Evidence from research suggests that adult involvement in children’s play, particularly in social pretend play, can enhance interactions, language use and problem solving as adults scaffold learning through participation and modelling (Pramling et al., 2018). Professional guidance describes adult led learning as a structured but meaningful way for adults to introduce concepts, direct learning and extend children’s understanding beyond their current knowledge (Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework Practice Principle Guide, 2017). Adult led play is especially beneficial for children with additional learning needs, as it allows carers to adapt activities based on their individual needs, as well as being able to support them with activities they may need extra support with. Vygotsky’s theory supports the value of adult led play, as he believed children learn best through social interaction and guidance from adults or more knowledgeable peers.

Giving children the opportunity to choose their own play is essential in supporting their independence, confidence, and self motivation. When children initiate their own play experiences, it is highly likely that they will stay more engaged, explore their interests and take responsibility for their own learning. This is supported by a systematic review which found that learning through play promotes sustained engagement, motivation and deeper learning as children are able to explore interests, solve problems and interact meaningfully with their environment (Yee, Radzi & Mamat, 2022). Child led play gives children their own sense of control, allowing them to make their own decisions, develop problem solving skills and expressing themselves in a range of ways, supporting both their emotional and cognitive development. Child initiated play has been shown to promote meaningful learning experiences by enabling children to explore interests that are personally significant to them

(Woods, 2017). Play based learning has been shown to support children's cognitive and emotional development through active exploration, creativity and problem solving (Quayyum et al., 2024). When children feel a sense of control over their play, there is a higher chance that they will show enjoyment, engagement, and a natural curiosity for learning. Child led play further supports children's emotional control, as they take responsibility for their behaviour and learn how to manage it appropriately and independently, work with peers and respond to challenges within their play. Evidence from early years research indicates that during child led play, children demonstrate greater control over their activity and higher levels of self regulation than in adult led play contexts (Whitebread et al., 2017). As well as providing children with freedom of choice, child led play takes place within clear and consistent boundaries set by adults. Having boundaries ensures children are safe and secure, able to explore and take risks. Setting boundaries around behaviour, safety and respect for others support children in understanding limits, while still allowing them to lead their own play. Child led play also supports emotional development, as children learn to manage frustration, negotiate with peers and respond to challenges in a natural and meaningful context. Research into learning through play highlights that play experiences are not only enjoyable but also actively support children's cognitive, emotional, and social development by being meaningful, engaging, and socially interactive allowing children to develop deeper understanding and become motivated learners (Zosh et al., 2017). When children initiate their own play they are able to act out real life experiences, test emotional responses and make sense of their feelings at their own pace, which UNICEF identifies as a key way in which play supports children's emotional development and resilience (UNICEF, 2018). This supports children with regulating their own emotions, as they learn how to manage frustration, cope with disappointment and experiences success independently. Additionally, child led play gives children the opportunity to develop self confidence as well as resilience, as they are responsible for making their own choices, and solving problems without constant adult direction. Through interactions with others, children learn empathy and understanding as they begin to recognise and understand the emotions of others, supporting the development of positive relationships. Studies indicate that adult support which focuses on scaffolding language can enhance learning within child directed play while maintaining children's autonomy (Jacobi-Vessels, 2017). Woods (2017) highlights that child led play prioritises children taking ownership of their learning through

activities that are shaped by their own individual interests and ideas. When practitioners create flexible and responsive environments, it allows practitioners to support play in ways that are more meaningful and engaging for children. Practitioner research suggests that while child led play is central to supporting children's independence and engagement, learning can be further extended when adults sensitively build on children's interests, creating a balance between child led and adult led experiences (Ingerslev, 2023).

In early years settings, cognitive and intellectual development influences how children think, explore, problem solve and understand their experiences. One effective observation method used to observe children's cognitive and intellectual development is an individual child observation, such as a running record. A running record involves the practitioner observing a child over a certain amount of time and recording their behaviour, actions, and language in detail as they occur without interpretation. This method is suitable for assessing cognitive and intellectual skills as it highlights children's thinking processes, use of language and levels of engagement during child led activities. When using a running record, practitioners are observing a child's cognitive and intellectual development during everyday experiences. For instance, whilst observing a child during child led play, a running record may highlight how a child engages with problem solving or how they approach it, such as exploring different ways of building different structures, using trial and error, or adapting their ideas when challenges arise. This makes child led play a valuable context for running record observations as play base experienced naturally involves problem solving, decision making and sustained thinking, providing practitioners with clear opportunities to observe children's cognitive development in practice (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Running records may also record the way a child uses their language to express their ideas or engage in discussions with friends or practitioners, demonstrating their developing and thinking skills. Running records are an effective method of observing as it allows practitioners to gather a clearer understanding of a child's current level of cognitive development, including their ability to engage and concentrate, make decisions independently and think independently. This aligns with Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development, especially the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development which suggests that children learn best when supported slightly beyond their current ability. Through the use of running records, practitioners are able to recognise when a child may require additional support to further develop their thinking, such as through

open ended questions or the providing resources that challenge learning. Research suggests that cognitive development involves children actively engaging in problem solving, using language to express ideas and learning through trial and error during play based experiences (Pedapti, 2022).

In early years practice, observation and assessment are essential for understanding children's development and informing appropriate support. Observing children during play provides practitioners with opportunities to gain an authentic insight into children's skills, interests, and learning, as play reflects children's natural behaviours and ways of thinking. Research by UNICEF highlights that play experiences are meaningful, engaging, and interactive, allowing children to display problem solving, communication and social skills in contexts that reflect how they naturally learn and explore, (UNICEF, 2018). Observing children within play based contexts is particularly valuable, as play allows children to lead their own learning and engage in activities that they find interest in. When children are observed during play, they are more likely to remain engaged, express their ideas freely and demonstrate their abilities naturally, providing practitioners with more in depth and accurate observational evidence (Ofsted, 2023). Play has significant impact on children's engagement during observations, as children are more likely to remain focussed and motivated when participating in activities that interest them. Higher levels of interest allow practitioners to observe children's learning more clearly, as children are actively involved, communicating ideas and demonstrating skills within their play. As children lead their own play, behaviours observed are more likely to reflect their genuine abilities rather than responses influenced by adult direction. While structured tasks can limit children's response, research reviews highlight that play based observation offers more authentic insight into children's development and learning (Kurt, 2020). Research evaluating play observation tools has found that during free play, children display more unscripted actions, speech and behavioural regulation compared to adult led play, demonstrating the richness of child led interactions for understanding development (Veraksa et al., 2025). This increases the reliability of observations as practitioners are recording what children can do independently within familiar and meaningful contexts (DfE, 2021). Guidance for early years practitioners highlights that observations should inform assessment and planning as they provide information about children's development which supports the identification of needs and

next steps (DfE, 2024). This is supported by guidance on the use of assessment tools, which explains that structured assessment approaches can be used alongside observational evidence to identify children's individual needs and inform appropriate support and planning (DfE, 2024). During play based observations, practitioners must adopt a sensitive and non intrusive role, allowing children to play freely while carefully recording observations without interrupting or directing the activity. This helps ensure that observations remain objective and accurately reflect children's learning and development. While play based observations provide valuable insight into children's development, there are limitations that practitioners must consider. For example, observations carried out during play may not capture all areas of development equally, particularly if a child avoids certain activities or prefers solitary play. This may result in gaps within observational evidence if practitioners rely on a single method or context. Additionally, children's mood, emotional state or external factors such as tiredness may influence how they engage in play, which can affect the accuracy of observations. Practitioners must therefore be cautious when interpreting observations and ensure that conclusions are not drawn from isolated incidents. Professional guidance emphasises that observation, assessment, and planning work together support children's development as observation enables practitioners to identify needs, evaluate responses and inform next steps in learning (West Sussex Early Years 2021). Similarly, Welsh government guidance highlights that assessment arrangements in early years should be based on observations of children's play to ensure planning is responsive to individual development and wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2022). Using multiple observations over time allows practitioners to build a more holistic picture of the child's development and reduces the risk of misinterpretation (Ofsted, 2023). This aligns with professional guidance that emphasises the role of observation and documentation in evaluating children's development and using this information to inform effective instruction and planning (Peterson & Elam, 2020). Ethical considerations are essential when carrying out observations within early years settings. Practitioners must ensure that observations are conducted respectfully and in line with confidentiality and safeguarding procedures. Information gathered during observations should be recorded securely and shared only with relevant professionals and parents where appropriate. Consent is another key ethical consideration as parents and carers must be informed about observational practices within the setting. Children should also be respected during observations, with practitioners remaining sensitive to children's comfort and

emotional wellbeing. If a child becomes distressed or uncomfortable, practitioners should prioritise the child's needs over completing the observation. Maintaining professionalism during observations is crucial to ensure that assessments remain fair and unbiased. Practitioners must reflect on their own assumptions and avoid labelling children based on limited evidence. Theoretical perspectives provide valuable guidance for interpreting observations in practice. For example, Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development highlights the importance of understanding what children can do independently and with support. Through careful observation during play, practitioners can identify moments where children may benefit from additional scaffolding to extend learning. Observations allow practitioners to recognise when a child is approaching a new stage of development and requires minimal support, such as providing new resources. This ensures that support is responsive rather than directive, allowing children to remain in control of their learning. By linking theory to observational practice, practitioners can ensure that assessment informs purposeful planning that supports children's development effectively. In conclusion, observation and assessment play a vital role in supporting children's development within early years settings. Observing children during play allows practitioners to gain authentic insights into children's skills, interests and learning as play reflects children's natural behaviours and engagement. Play-based observations support accuracy by enabling practitioners to observe children in meaningful contexts while ethical and reflective practice ensures that assessment remains fair and supportive. Although play-based observation has limitations, using a range of observation methods and observing over time supports holistic understanding of children's development. Overall, effective observation informs planning, supports individual needs and promotes positive developmental outcomes for children.

This section reflects on the professional skills demonstrated throughout this assignment, including academic writing, structure, organisation and presentation. The work has been written in a clear and professional manner, ensuring that ideas are logically structured and aligned with assessment requirements. Care has been taken to present information accurately and coherently supporting effective communication of key concepts related to early years practice. The assignment is organised into clearly defined sections that reflect assessment brief, supporting a logical flow of ideas. Each section builds upon the previous

discussion, allowing for progression from theory to practice. Clear paragraphing has been used to present ideas concisely, ensuring that the work remains easy to follow. This structured approach supports professional presentation and demonstrates an understanding of academic expectations within higher education. Academic writing conventions have been followed through the assignment, including the use of formal language, appropriate terminology and consistent referencing. Sources have been integrated effectively to support key points, demonstrating engagement with relevant research, policy and professional guidance. Harvard referencing has been used consistently for both in text citations and the reference list, ensuring academic integrity and avoiding plagiarism. This reflects professional responsibility and adherence to university guidelines. The assignment meets the portfolio requirements by demonstrating understanding of early years observation, assessment and professional practice. Word count guidelines have been adhered to and the work has been presented clearly and professionally. Attention has been given to clarity, accuracy and relevance ensuring that the assignment reflects both academic knowledge and practical understanding of early years practice. Overall, the professional presentation of this assignment reflects the skills required within early years practice, including organisation, reflection and effective communication.

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