

Cover Sheet

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AI cover sheet

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

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

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

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

Total Word Count for Assignment - 3298

Reference List

AI Statement –

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

Introduction

A child's right to play is protected within Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC, Article 15 Freedom of association, and Article 12 Respect for the views of the child . Welsh Government, WG (2014) state that since 2004 Wales are committed to ensuring these rights are a reality for all children. Highlighting by providing access to qualitative play experiences it encourages a child's holistic development and may in fact reduce the negative effects of deprivation when children are faced with socioeconomic challenges.

International Play Association, IPA, (2013) and WG (2002) and BBC (n.d) state play is inextricably linked to a child's holistic development and that it is intrinsically fundamental, open ended and non compulsory in nature. It embodies any unstructured, uncontrolled activity or behaviour that a child initiates. Play "may take infinite forms but the key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity" (IPA, 2013, p. 2).

WG (2014) agree and cite the Welsh Play Policy's definition adding play can come in many forms. When playing in the natural world it enables children to learn about the natural and social environment around them. It is a process rather than a product and underpins the learning and development of all children, play is integral not only for themselves but for society itself (WG 2002). This leans into theory from Froebel and Reggio where they see the child as part of nature and them being valued and involved with their communities (Aubrey and Riley, 2022).

WG (2002), McInnes *et al.* (2013) and IPA (2013) all agree play is critical to teaching, learning and development and that it encourages decision making, creativity and freedom of thought. Play is self directed by a child's own interest which as a result has validity for all ages and when denied free access it can inhibit leaning. Play should offer no external rewards or goals (McInnes *et al.*, 2013).

WG (2014) and Sandseter *et al.* (2019) agree there are mounting barriers to play. Increased traffic population, perceived dangers from others, lack of available safe play spaces and an increased amount of screen time having all had a negative impact. IPA (2013) add to this with the concerns of the UNCRC in relation to Article

31 and the poor recognition from governments regarding a child's right to play. In addition they cite violence in all forms, increasing urban populations and child labour as barriers to play. Due to these UNCRC has responded with Comment No. 17 which includes three core objectives: Enhancing understanding and respect, strengthening the application of Article 31 and to highlight the implications of government obligations including those of public and private sector.

Recognising the barriers WG has committed itself to valuing and providing more play safe activities and communities for children, indoors and outdoors, thus improving children's physical health, development and well being (WG, 2014).

Play can take many forms however stages of play are well documented. Founding theorist Parten defined six clear stages of play from birth to age four plus. These are unoccupied, solitary, spectator, parallel, associative and cooperative play. During each stage children are encouraged to explore and be creative (Bone, 2021 and BBC, n.d).

Every child is different and no two children play the same. When at play children engage with their whole selves and active play builds healthy bodies (Bone, 2021). During the early years freedom of movement and physical development is needed to build the skills to be able to use muscles individually or in whole body movements to build strength, flexibility of movement and endurance. It also enables children to discover and learn about spatial awareness and how to control their own movements (Pickler USA, 2018 and Australian Education, 2024). Furthermore it is well documented that physical movement reduces the levels of cortisol on the brain thus reducing stress and has additional benefits on cognition and brain development (Bone, 2021 and Waters-Davies, 2022).

Play Wales, PW, (2017) and Waters-Davies (2022) stipulate physical locomotor play, is movement in any direction for its own purpose. Sandseter *et al.* (2019) distinguish the benefits of physical activity to the holistic development of not only the child but the family as a whole. With additional benefits to society in reductions of anti-social behaviours. Edutopia (2019a) acknowledge that when a child's physical needs are met it enables their brain to be in the best place in readiness for learning. If their bodies feel good their brain feels good.

Play Wales, PW, (2025) state through physical rough and tumble play children learn their own strengths and limitations. They create boundaries for themselves and learn to control their anger. PW (2017) state many children enjoy the fast paced exhilaration of a game of chase or tag however it must be noted that there is a difference between what can be deemed as playful and what would be considered serious pursuit.

When considering physical play it often benefits adults to consider mastery play. This can be described as play opportunities that children revisit time and again. With well managed timely activities children are able to feel safe and comfortable while engaging in activities that could be deemed as challenging (Waters-Davies, 2022) .

PW (2017) depicts the urge for children to master and control not just themselves, within physical play, but also the environment they're within. Allowing children to master skills within their environment encourages them to develop their own competence and confidence. It allows them to engage with the natural world by building fires and dens and creating water dams in streams all while building a knowledge and understating of what the natural world can do. With all of these comes an element of risk. PW (2025) states that where children are offered risk and challenge they will begin to consider ways to improve. With enabling environments and enabling and encouraging adults that can recognise appreciable levels of risk and dedicated areas in settings children can be offered these play opportunities (PW, 2017).

Component 2

Learning through Landscapes (2013) suggest free play can be described as child directed, freely chosen, and inherently motivated. Within safe environments children are able to choose what, how, where and who they do it with. This aligns with the works of Bruner, Vygotsky, Froebel and Montessori who all concur that children learn best when they are engaged in authentic practical play experiences (Aubrey and Riley, 2022).

During free play adults will observe without offering an agenda or stipulations allowing children to make their own rules and decisions. A true sense of freedom is offered when play is driven by a child's own desire and satisfaction (Waters-Davies, 2022).

Reggio and Montessori are in agreement that the child is capable and competent, both theorists highlight the importance of the child being independent and allowing them the freedom of movement within their spaces. These principles link directly to Welsh curriculum and creating capable, ambitious and confident individuals (Aubrey and Riley, 2002, Bone, 2021 and WG, 2022).

Engaging in “play for the sake of play” (Besio, 2017, cited Waters-Davies, 2022, p. 37) allows for the freedom of choice which is essential for building children’s brains. While developing their cognition and wellbeing children learn and develop autonomy. Without free play and free choice children are more likely to have low self-esteem, be dependent on others and will be more easily influenced later in life.

“For play to remain play, the adult cannot take control of, or direct the play to meet their own agenda, or to meet a specific outcome” (Waters-Davies, 2022, p. 9). However it must be noted that for play to be the most impactful the adults role is vital. A professional understanding and genuine interest in early years and play is essential to that of an early years practitioner enabling them to support and extend a child’s learning (Waters-Davies, 2022).

Froebel and Montessori agree that, in play, a child can only be free when the adult is an acute observer. However Froebel believed children are creative learners harnessing the environment around them while Montessori believed that children should be engaged with activities that imitate real life experiences (Aubrey and Riley, 2022).

Both Howard (2020) and Howard and McInnes (2012) agree play is a state of mind that affords opportunities to practice emotions and ideas. It allows for risks while supporting resilience and self esteem all while amplifying wellbeing and development.

Howard (2020) and McClean (2013) state that an adults perspective on play will have an impact on how they interact with a child. It can determine how they interact, support and make decisions in terms of how they present activities and how they participate themselves, thus directly affecting a child’s experience (McClean, 2023 and King and Newstead, 2019). In relation when measuring a child’s perception of play Howard and McInnes (2012) found when children viewed an activity as play rather than not play they presented with increased emotional well being supporting

the idea that play is not only observable but also a state of mind. Furthermore McInnes et al (2013) cites traditionally play has been based on an adults perception rather than that of a child's and that this needs further additional well developed research.

King and Newstead (2023) discuss the play cycle and how adults can be seen as loose parts. They are essential within the serve and return and developing the flow of the play. However this is dependent on the adult offering the correct cues and responses at the right times within the cycle itself. This links with the works of Bruner, influenced by Vygotsky, and Reggio that suggests adults are educators who scaffold and encourage learning through problem solving while revisiting prior learning and linking to new knowledge. In addition adults are co-creators supporting children to pursue their own interests that promote exploration and language development (Aubrey and Riley, 2022 and Pound, 2006).

Learning through Landscapes (2013) state an adults role is to balance freedom and guidance while providing an enriching enabling environment for the children. By observing what the children are naturally interested in it will allow the adults to open up new opportunities and helps to inform future decision making.

Adults must be able to offer inclusive environments accepting children for the unique individuals they are while also offering accessible spaces, differentiated activities and objectives for all learners. Dewey's theory of valuing and knowing the children in your care, planning to their individual needs and following a person centred practice allows for a sense of belonging and links directly with Welsh legislation (Aubrey and Riley, 2022, Waters-Davies 2022 and WG 2022).

Edutopia (2019b) recognise the role of the adult and build Belonging Classrooms that enable children to feel connected to who they are, their teachers and their peers. Educators draw on their knowledge of the child allowing for tailored nurturing. Edutopia advocate a sense of belonging as one of the most effective activators for a child's learning.

Component 3

Observation is the process of carefully looking and listening while making a record of what you have witnessed and heard. This will then evaluate and inform planning

and practice (Smidt, 2015) Observation is an essential element to an early years practitioner role (WG, 2022).

Observations only have value if they are purposeful and inform practice. In current times good practice for record keeping and in particular observational techniques in the early years are essential to a practitioners role and the development of children (Bruce *et al.*, 2019 and Aubrey and Riley, 2022).

Fleet *et al.* (2017) and Brodie (n.d) determine that while observation and pedagogical documentation can be worthwhile it must always include foundational points, who is it for, who is going to contribute, the time frame and what the pedagogy of the documentation is (Fleet, 2015, quoted in Fleet *et al.*, 2017, p. 25).

Brodie (n.d) and Gunawen *et al.* (2023) agree that while all observations are pertinent to the practitioners role they must be purposeful with each style of observational technique requiring a different set of skills. This enables practitioners to optimise a child's developmental outcomes and prepare them for future challenge and success. Furthermore Brodie (n.d) suggests that the shortest observation, the Magic Moment, does in fact take the most skill as practitioners will need to act in the moment, recording quickly and succinctly whilst always being accurate.

It must be noted that observations take place through the lens of the observer, this can impact the observers objectivity and add bias to the observation itself. By using a breadth of observational techniques practitioners can ensure they counteract any bias while also discovering a wealth of information regarding the children in their care (Brodie, n.d and Gunawen *et al.*, 2023).

Observational techniques take many forms. Brodie (n.d) and Bruce *et al.* (2019) list time sampling, checklists, rating scales, learning stories and tracking to name a few. Each with their own advantages and disadvantages. For the remainder of this section the Schedule of Growing Skills II (SGS) will be considered.

Bellman *et al.* (1987) state the SGS is a standardised developmental screening tool that firmly aligns with the works of Dr Mary Sheridan (1985). The SGS measures a child's development against an assigned number of tasks completed in a particular format that follow the natural progression of child development from birth to five years. The aim being to use it as part of child health programmes as standard across

the country to determine any deficits and or developmental needs that may need further investigations (Shropshire Community Health, n.d and Bellman *et al.* 1987).

The SGS is designed to be quick and easy with assessors needing little training to complete. It is comprised of a record form that scores the child's skills. These quantitative scores are then transferred to a proforma which determine where the child's abilities lie within the given age range. It is completed with parents in the child's home or in a clinic setting and for some sections parents can answer questions with their responses also contributing towards scoring (Bellman *et al.* 1987).

Bellman *et al.* (1987) addressed the contradictory views of professionals in terms of the insensitive mechanical screening process and that it is a tool which should be used alongside clinical judgement by professionals who are known to the child and family. This however could also cause issues with one professionals clinical judgement differing from another. Williams *et al.* (2013) agreed with Bellman's idea of the SGS insensitivity. So much so they proposed an alternative scoring method supported by the Griffiths Developmental Assessment. When using this they found better standard related validity allowing for more appropriate data that could be fed into onward referrals.

When considering the checklist nature of the SGS it is essential to consider the following points. Gunawen *et al.* (2023) addressed the ease of using checklists as they were quick and easy allowing behaviors to be recorded a number of times, on multiple occasions for multiple children. However Gunwen *et al.* (2023) also addressed missing essential details and context. In agreement Bruce *et al.* (2019) state checklists create a narrow focus which only allows the practitioner to observe a specific, predetermined set of skills. They are pre- structured and adult focused therefore restraining the child's natural focus and attention. This is in direct contrast to Welsh policy and practice that guides practitioners to value and foster an individual child's needs and interests. Checklists offer no flexibility or context and often constrain and deny valid information (Bruce *et al.*, 2019 and WG, 2022).

Component 4

Observations link directly with the design structure of Reggio which allows children to be socio constructivists. Reggio enables children to use a self guided curriculum and write their own story all while developing their personality (NIDO, 2025).

Observations during play are well documented within the works of Dewey, Isaacs and Vygotsky with the latter advocating for observations during play as this is where the confident child is seen (Smidt, 2015 and Gowrie, 2024). Besio et al. (2018) agrees and states "Observations should be conducted during play in a naturalistic environment of children, focusing on child initiated play rather than it being adult led".

Bruce *et al.* (2019) maintain observing during play allows for parental partnerships, informs sharing, planning and organisation all while displaying progress and next steps. Furthermore it allows for focus and flexibility and encourages children and practitioners to reflect on play and practice. Using play for observation offers practitioners insights into what the child is directly interested in, it elicits information about a child's motivations and occupations (Gokce, 2020). This directly links with Montessori's theory of allowing observation without expectation (Aubrey and Riley, 2022).

Brodie (n.d) states the most important role of a teacher is observation of children at play. With consent from a legal guardian and using a range of purposeful observational techniques is best practice and one of the easiest ways to understand and support a child's interests and need's.

During research, despite the small sample of children, McInnes *et al.* (2013) determined that an adults presence within play would determine whether a child saw this as a play activity or not. Where children were offered choice and control through continuous playful interactions they were more likely to perceive activities as play. Without, less so. When adults have the ability to fully understand a child's perspective of play it has a direct impact on their role within the play itself. Where an adult is present they must be proximal, this enables the adult to maximise the child's play potential.

When observing practitioners must also consider the Hawthorn Effect, when a child knows they are being observed they may behave differently than they would when

not (Encore Research Group, 2020). The works of Pahl (1999, cited Smidt, 2015, p. 17) addresses this by ingratiating themselves within the classroom as a parent helper. This ensured the children didn't become suspicious of an outsider and responded as their natural selves.

Gokce (2020) and Edutopia (2019a) also consider the surroundings when observing during play. Both equate the familiarity of the learning environment as having an impact on the success of observations. Furthermore Edutopia (2019a) state that for a child to be able to learn the brain needs to be in a calm state so it can focus on what is important within the task of play itself. Gowrie (2024) adds that practitioners must slow down and bring quietness to the observational process encouraging depth and meaning.

Gokce (2020) further discusses naturalistic observations, where a child is observed in a familiar environment, which lend themselves more easily to play observations. This allows them to be more authentic, unstructured and open ended.

Gokce (2020) depicts the numerous benefits to observing during play. With authentic play experiences comes authentic data which can inform practice and decision making. This information can be shared with the child's family, practitioners and outside agencies. Using photo's, video's and learning journeys can help to make joint decisions regarding the child and can in fact include the child's own voice through play based interviews and play preferences (Johnson *et al.*, 2005, cited Gokce, 2020, p. 8). When undertaken sensitively and responsively they can nurture relationships between practitioners and children (Gowrie, 2024).

An observation is completed in present time. It is important to remember that external factors can impact on the outcome, is the child unwell, hungry or tired, is the space conducive to observation or are they worried about anything at home. When concluding observations it is good practice to include any impacting factors that may have affected the outcome (Sharmen *et al.* 2015). Brodie(n.d) states it is essential to use a range of observational methods over time as this enables practitioners to gain a wide breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding of the children in their care.

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