

AI Cover Sheet

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Play 3096

Section 1

Play is a difficult concept to define and can have multiple meanings (Eberle, 2014). McInnes, Howard, Crowley, and Miles (2013) add that traditional definition of play are influenced by how adults observe and understand children's behaviour. According to the UNCRC, cited in Water-Davies (2022), play is a self-initiated and self-directed activity that occurs when opportunities arise. The Welsh Government's (2002) Play Policy supports this, describing play as freely chosen and self-directed, adding that it is a natural behaviour essential to children's learning, growth, and understanding of the world. Hamid (2018) states that Piaget's theory sees play as essential for fostering cognitive development.

Play Wales (2017) identifies several types of play, including physical play, which focuses on activities like swinging, hopping, and dancing. Physical play supports holistic development by improving balance, coordination, and strength. According to Harris and Westermann (2015), Piaget identified four stages of development, with the first being the Sensorimotor stage. In this stage, children develop cognitively by physically interacting with their surroundings. For example, physical play fosters problem-solving, such as when a child learns to adjust their movements to swing higher or stop safely. Additionally, it promotes social skills, such as taking turns or working together. Furthermore, Care Learning (2024) highlights that engaging in physical play helps children maintain a healthy weight and release endorphins, which promote happiness and relaxation.

Physical play provides vestibular input, which is particularly beneficial for children seeking this type of sensory stimulation. Ford (2019) explains that vestibular input refers to sensations from changes in head position. For instance, swinging involves tilting the head up and down, while spinning creates continuous movement. The Centre for Autism (2025) highlights that children who crave vestibular movement often engage in activities like swinging and jumping, which help them feel grounded and focused. Providing sufficient space for activities such running, climbing, and exploring can facilitate physical play. The Welsh Government (n.d.) states that the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 requires local authorities to provide adequate play opportunities for children in their communities. Play

Wales (n.d.) adds that the Play Sufficiency Duty 2012 requires local authorities to conduct play sufficiency assessments every three years.

Play Wales (2017) explains that exploratory play involves children learning by interacting with and experimenting with objects to understand how they function. Lynch (2022) states that through exploratory play, children engage their senses, such as touch, smell, and taste, to discover and make sense of the world around them. For example, when exploring a sensory bin filled with sand and wooden blocks, a child may run their hands through the sand, feeling its texture, while also experimenting with stacking or arranging the blocks. This hands-on experience supports cognitive development and provides opportunities for communication, including gestures for non-verbal children. Additionally, it aids in social and emotional development and supports language development. This aligns with Piaget's Sensorimotor stage, where children use their senses to develop cognitively (Harris & Westermann, 2015).

Brodie (2024) discusses Parten Newhall's theory of the six stages of play: unoccupied play, solitary play, onlooker play, parallel play, associative play, and cooperative play. Parten Newhall explains that as children grow, they move through these stages, becoming more socially engaged in their play. For example, in the earliest stage, unoccupied play, a baby may simply observe their surroundings, move their arms and legs, and take in the world around them. In the solitary play stage, a child might play with toys alone, focusing on their activity without interacting with others. In the onlooker stage, a child might watch how others play but not actively join in.

Thomas (2023) states that Parten's last three stages of play—parallel, associative, and cooperative—are more social. According to Parten, the parallel play stage, as highlighted in Brodie (2024), is where children play next to each other with similar toys but do not directly interact. For example, two children may build towers with blocks side by side but without sharing materials or working together. Parten's associative play stage, described in Brodie (2024), is when children start to engage with each other, sharing toys and talking, but not fully collaborating. For instance, two children playing with their own blocks may share materials and comment on each other's structures but without working toward a shared goal. Brodie (2024) states

that Parten Newhall's final stage, cooperative play, involves children working together toward a common goal. For example, two children may collaborate to build a house with blocks, discussing placement and taking turns to achieve their desired structure. This aligns with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Silalahi (2019) explains that with appropriate support from a more capable individual, a child can complete tasks slightly beyond their independent ability, fostering learning and development.

Section 2

According to Sunstone Montessori School (2019) self-directed play allows children to play freely without adult directed expectation. In practice, self-directed play may involve opportunities for various activities, such as art material, building area, or sensory material. Children can choose what to engage with. Exploring and learning at their own pace, without adult imposed expectations.

Ledendecker (2020) state that self-directed play benefits children in building confidence, independence and creativity, while also improving problem solving skills and allowing them to learn at their own pace. In practice, when children have freedom to explore on their own, they begin to realise how much they can do for themselves, which boost their confidence. The independence reduces their reliance on close support, encouraging them to take initiative. The variety of resources accessible for self-directed play stimulates creativity in multiple ways, whether using big arm movements for mark making or building and problem solving, figuring out how things work and experimenting with new ideas. Self-directed play can be used to explore subjects in The Curriculum for Wales, the six areas of learning which include language, literacy and communication, mathematics and numeracy (The Welsh Government, 2022a).

According to Marie (2024) children with additional learning needs often have difficulty keeping up with the pace of traditional learning, which can lead to them becoming disengaged. The self-direct play allows children to learn at their own pace, using their interest, choice and freedom, which makes learning more lasting and meaningful. Montessori advocates for self-directed play, Woods (2021) highlights several Montessori's principles, one of which is allowing children to move freely

within safe environment. However, according to Isaacs (2018), the greatest obstacle to maintaining the relevance of Montessori's ideas today is the mindset of the adult.

McLean *et al.* (2022) state that enhancing opportunities for children's play can be achieved by educating adults to recognise the importance of play in supporting children's development. According to King, Taylor and Sturrock (2020) the play cycle consists of six components, metalude, cue, return, frame, loop and flow and annihilation. In practice, the metalude component of the play cycle can be where children are inspired by their surroundings, often in engaging activities. Cues can include adult modelling, such as playing with blocks to invite children into play. Children create frames, choosing areas where they feel comfortable, like quiet or sensory spaces. Return happens when the adult responds to the child's cue, such as when a child plays with rice and looks up to the adult for guidance. The adult might respond by offering more rice or showing how to pour it into a container, encouraging further engagement. As play progresses, flow occurs when children become deeply absorbed in their chosen play. Loop is the repetition, and through repetition, the learning becomes embedded. Eventually, play ends with annihilation, when the child decides to stop. Adults support by observing and stepping back to avoid adulteration.

Research by Aminpour, Bishop, and Corkery (2020) found children use more than just playgrounds for play, so school design should consider all in-between spaces to better support their play. Consideration of the environment supports the frame component to the play cycle. Creating accessible areas, such as quiet corners with books, sensory tuff trays or block areas encourages children to explore and engage with their surroundings. This aligns with The Welsh Government (2025) curriculum for Non-Maintained Nursery Setting, which highlights the importance of regularly assessing and adjusting the environment to ensure it offers children meaningful experiences.

Welsh Government (2025) Curriculum for Non-Maintained Settings state that observations play a crucial role in planning relevant learning experiences. It illustrates an observation cycle, which begin with noticing, followed by analysis and then responding. In practice, an adult observes a child playing with sand and water; after analysing they notice the child's interest in textures. The adult responds by providing various textured material for the child to explore. This aligns with Rolfe *et*

a/. (2001) reflective cycle cited in Fallin (2024) the three stages: What? So what? and now what? McLeod (2024) highlights Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding, which aligns with providing the right level of support to challenge a child. In this case, by introducing new sensory materials, the adult is scaffolding the child's exploration, helping them to explore more complex idea and deepening their understanding of the world.

Section 3

According to Cambridge Dictionary (2024) is the watching or monitoring someone closely. Observing someone means watching closely to understand and gather information and identify areas that need support. GL Assessment (2017) states that the Schedule of Growing Skills is a developmental assessment tool used to assess children from birth to five years of age. It evaluates nine key areas such as motor skills, language, social interaction and self-care. The SOGS assessment takes a holistic approach by assessing multiple areas of development; by covering nine key areas, it provides a broad view of the child's progress rather than focusing on just one aspect.

GL Assessment (2017) state that SOGS is a quick and straightforward assessment tool that takes 30 minutes to complete through play-based activities. This allows early years practitioners to efficiently use it in nurseries settings or at home, ensuring that children's development can be assessed promptly without being time consuming. For example, an early year's practitioner can complete an assessment within a nurse setting without requiring additional resources or disrupting the child's routine. The simplicity of the assessment allows the assessment allows observation to be made through engaging play-based activities, making it less intrusive for the child while still providing valuable insight into the child's development.

GL Assessment (2017) state that the SOGS assessment tool can help to identify developmental progress and challenges. The assessment helps to identify areas where the child is falling behind expected milestones. This helps early years practitioners to provide targets support. For example, a practitioner may notice that a toddler is struggling with fine motor skills, such as picking up small objects. Using the SOGS assessment, the practitioner can identify the issues early on and provide

targeted support, like fine motor skills activities such as using threading or participating in activities like play dough to strengthen finger muscles and develop their fine motor skills. This supports the Healthy Child Wales Programme (The Welsh Government 2022b) by contributing to the identifying any potential developmental concerns in a quick and simple way.

The SOGS assessment tool helps provide early intervention by identifying delays quickly, which aligns with Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 which state that children with additional needs get the support they need (Welsh Government, 2018). By using the SOGS assessment, practitioners can spot concerns early and act swiftly. For example, a SOGS assessment tool flagged up a child's developmental delay across multiple areas. The nursery setting would create an individual Development Plan tailored to the child's need. The Individual development plan should outline specific objectives and strategies to achieve them. This plan would be reviewed regularly, and the SOGS assessment can play a part in evaluating the progress. If the support provided within the nursery setting proves to be insufficient or the child's need are more complex, the nursery can refer for a local authority based IDP. This will be more detailed, involving multi agency working, to provide additional support and resources tailored to the child's individual needs. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner exosystem (Hayes, O'Toole, and Halpenny 2017). This is an example of how the exosystem impacts the child in an in direct way to support the child's needs.

According to GL Assessment (2017) the SOGS assessment tool provide a clear and easy to read format of a child's developmental progress, making it easier to discuss findings with the parents. For example, when discussing the SOGS assessment findings, the practitioner can present the simple results outlining areas of progress and delays. The practitioner and parent can use the SOGS results to collaborate, setting clear goals together and identifying strategies to support the child's development. For instance, using visuals or speech therapy to support a delay in communication. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem, as it emphasises the importance of interaction between two setting, such as home and nursery (Hayes, O'Toole, and Halpenny 2017). After SOGS assessment, practitioners and parents can collaborate to create supportive strategies that are consistent helping to foster growth. This collaboration ensures that both home and school agree.

However, according to the a (2014) the SOGS assessment tool is not designed for in depth assessment in areas such as speech and language. While the SOGS assessment tool does assess speech and language development, it does not go into detail that a specialist speech and language assessment would. It provides a general overview rather than diagnosing specific issues. In practice, the SOGS assessment tool can be used as an early assessment tool to identify areas where a child may need support and facilitate referrals for a specialised diagnosis if necessary.

Additionally, the Welsh Government (2014) noted that practitioners raised concerns about inconsistencies in how the SOGS assessment tool was being implemented. This suggest there is potential for subjectivity and different practitioners may interpret a child's abilities differently, leading to inconsistencies in results. For instance, one practitioner might view a toddler stacking a few blocks as a milestone, while another might expect a taller tower. As stated by the Welsh Government (2014) practitioners pointed out that the guidance for SOGS should be more detailed and specific. By issuing more detailed guidance, practitioners will be able to be more precise in their assessments, which is likely to lead to more consistent results.

Section 4

According to Besio, Bulgarelli, and Stancheva-Popkostadinova (2018) play is important for observation, as it is the main way children communicate their present state. Since play is natural and spontaneous, children take part willingly. This connects to the crucial role adults play in supporting self-directed play by creating environments that encourage exploration and independence. According to McInnes *et al.* (2013), the way adults use language and offer choices in settings influences whether children rely on the adult's presence to distinguish between play and non-play situations. By offering clear choices and using open-ended language, adults help children navigate their play more freely. For instance, when a child looks at the adult for guidance, an adult might say, "You can choose which materials you would like to use today," promoting decision-making and independence. The child's response to this choice could offer valuable insight during observation and understand their needs more clearly.

Howard and McInnes (2012), study show that children's emotional well-being is enhanced when they perceive an activity as play, making self-directed play more meaningful. This reflects how adults respond to children's cues, offering guidance without taking over, in line with the return phase in the play cycle. This also aligns with Erikson psychosocial stage highlighted in McLeod (2024) particularly the autonomy versus shame and doubt stage, stating that independence helps build confidence and without independence doubts about one's ability may arise. For example, a child who is consistently guided by an adult in selecting activities may become unsure of their ability to play independently. This is likely to make them hesitant in trying new activities on their own, doubting their ability to make choices and problem solve. By offering children a wide range of activities and material to explore freely can build confidence. This is important for observation, as it helps practitioners to assess the child's holistic development.

The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, as highlighted by the Welsh Government (2025) emphasises that practitioners can support this by providing a range of materials and activities that encourage independent exploration, taking into consideration the child's holistic development, interest and preference. This aligns with Froebel's approach, highlighted in Louis (2022) which emphasises the importance of practitioners listening to children and understanding their what motivates them. For instance, a practitioner might observe children enjoying textures of sensory material like rice and foam, engaging in scooping, and pouring. Observing this, the practitioner plans to provide a variety of sensory material in different areas, adding additional items like big and small containers to extend their play. practitioners can reflect continuously on their observation by using methods such as Rolfe *et al.* (2001) reflective cycle cited in Fallin (2024) the three stages: What? So what? and now what?

It is considered essential that adults in the environment have good observational skills, by standing back and allowing the children to take a lead. The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, as highlighted by the Welsh Government (2025) state that practitioners should be able to recognise the right moment to provide support to a child in their learning. Skilled observation helps practitioners to get a more accurate understanding of the child's abilities. By stepping back, adults give children the space to show their critical thinking skills, social interaction, and

emotional responses. The adult's role is to observe the activity and offer help when required. This ensures that the observation reflects the child's natural response. For example, if a child is building with blocks and gets frustrated when the tower falls, a good observer would take this as a chance to see the child's resilience and problem-solving skills. Rather than stepping in right away, the practitioner waits to see how the child manages the challenge. By stepping back, the adult gains an accurate understanding of the child during observation.

However, whilst observation through play is considered crucial, there are many challenges that can affect it. Care Learning (2025) highlights several challenges such as the difficulty of observing children learning through play, when they are responsible for the safety of other children. In practice, practitioners may struggle to balance the need for detailed and careful observation with the responsibility of supervising children's safety. This can make it difficult to capture a child's development accurately. A solution for this could be, that one practitioner conducts observations, whilst others supervise the remaining children to ensure safety.

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