

Children's play: principles and practice

Types of play

There are many types of play, including imaginative, symbolic, dramatic and exploratory (Hughes 2012). It can be challenging to define what play is and children will gain a different experience from each variety. Play is intrinsic to a child, derived from their own interest and undertaken for pure pleasure (Trevino and DeFreitas, 2014). Having access to varied play opportunities contributes to holistic development, where every aspect of a child's learning is entwined (Brodie, 2018). This is like the 'Te Whariki' approach, adopted in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2017). For this piece of work, creative and fantasy play will be discussed.

Creative play allows children to experiment and create with a range of materials, tools and equipment. They can express themselves, being free to explore new ideas and make new connections (Hughes, 2002). In practice, free access to a variety of resources should be provided (Burnham, 2016). Recyclable items can be used, such as bottle tops or packaging materials. These provide opportunity to talk about caring for the planet, teaching children to respect their environment. In addition to craft and art resources, consider provision of music and dance activities, giving another way for children to express themselves. Children may have limited access to creative opportunities at home, due to lack of space, money or time. Being in a well-planned and thoughtfully resourced environment may provide their first taste of creative freedom. A child may not always have an end goal when they create – they may just continuously experiment. According to Hicks, (2001), providing objects such as books, pictures, sounds, textures and smells sparks ideas and the creative thinking process begins. Gross and fine motor skills improve, from picking up small items or making big dance

movements and communication skills, mathematical vocabulary and elements of personal, social and emotional development can be seen, maybe if a child gives praise to a friend who has created something special or talks about the size and shape of objects. A gallery area could be provided to display children's work, giving further opportunity for them to reflect and talk about what they have done.

Creativity encourages healthy development as it keeps children's imaginations alive (Shulman, 2020). As school budgets are diminishing, creative activities such as art, drama and music are first to disappear from the timetable, meaning creative development becomes compromised. As per the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef, 1989), Article 31, every child has the right to take part in artistic activities and to play and relax.

Fantasy play encourages imagination and children recreate the world to suit their ideas of how it could be. They can be whoever they want, go where they like, dress up as they please and act out anything their imagination can conjure up. They will create their own narrative and listen to those of others. Friendships are made when children play together, and they will learn new vocabulary from friends with different experiences. According to Paley (2004), fantasy play provides a nurturing habitat for cognitive and narrative development, and also social skills. In Early Years practice, there is emphasis on giving real-life, hands-on experiences. However, if children are allowed to use their imaginations also and create fantasy scenarios, they experience good feelings, making the activity pleasurable and positive for their mental health. Problem solving and conflict resolution develop also (Grimmer, 2019). There will be disagreements over roles or the direction of play, which will encourage discussion and hopefully compromise, as eagerness to play takes over. Whilst given a chance to escape the real world, children may also act out real life situations in play, knowing that they are in a safe environment to do so. Practitioners can, through observation, notice things causing concern or distress to a child, and this can be addressed appropriately during or after play. Gray (2011) states that the decline in play over the last half century has

contributed to the rise in anxiety, depression and narcissism in children. Play helps them regulate their emotions and is good for their general mental health. Without play opportunities, they may fail to develop the emotional and social skills needed for healthy development.

Fantasy play takes time to develop to its fruition and practitioners should allow a good amount of time for children to engage. Resources can be left out for longer than a day, so children can revisit to move their play along later. Clearly labelled props and costumes encourage children to independently select what they need and a home corner is valuable to have as a permanent fixture, as this allows children to express cultural experiences with familiar items, as well as exploring things new to them. Remember to consider all cultures, for example providing chopsticks or balti dishes in addition to knives and forks.

Self-chosen play and the role of adult

Play is a child's way of exploring and understanding the world around them. Play is intrinsically motivated, self-led and provides opportunity for expression, creativity and experimentation (Schaefer & Drewes, 2014). It is personal to each child and led by their interests. If a child is encouraged to play freely, rather than being directed to play, they will enjoy acquiring new skills and this may lead to a lifelong love of learning. It also caters to the unique child and their differing rates of development. If they are free to choose their activities, they can take as long as they need to perfect their skills (Russell, 2024). Child-directed play also prepares children for academic success, as it enhances creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. According to Fiechtner and Albrecht (2019), child-directed play is like free play but with more adult engagement. Although play is facilitated by an adult, it is still fully directed and controlled by the child. Practitioners who really know the children in their care, through discussion with the child, parents/carers and good observation skills, will know how to tailor activities to individuals, building on their current knowledge and promoting further learning and development. The EYFS Framework discusses the effects of positive relationships, enabling environments and the unique child approach, on the learning and development

of children. Bruner and Vygotsky agree that good social and cultural relationships are key to a child's cognitive development.

A study by Howard and McInnes (2012) found that children showed higher levels of engagement and development when they perceived an activity to be 'like play'. Simple factors such as the proximity of an adult, the location of the activity and whether the child had a choice to participate, were seen to affect the outcome of how well the child engaged. This information can give insight to a practitioner when setting up their learning environment. Is there a need for activities to be on tables? Do children have enough space to move and play freely? Are resources clearly labelled and easily accessible, enabling children to independently choose their own equipment? Do resources stimulate the children and reflect their interests? Are staff trained in how to observe effectively and moreover, do they understand the purpose behind it? When structuring staff, it is worth considering that children can be encouraged by familiar adults acting as play partners, letting the children lead the activity, rather than dictating how it should be done (Howard and McInnes 2012). As self-directed play embraces some Montessori principles, it is beneficial to include resources with open ended possibilities, when considering purchases for your setting. For example, a toy train is a lovely addition but at the end of the day, it is just a train and does not provide many opportunities for alternative play. On the other hand, if a box of cardboard tubes were provided, these would probably be used in a different way by every child in the class, if they were allowed independent choice. In addition to the classroom environment, it is important to consider the outdoors also. Studies have shown the need for more 'in-between spaces', for children to better enjoy their self-directed activities. There are physical, social and organisational aspects of outdoor areas that prevent children from fully accessing their chosen recreational activities. Martensson et al (2014) found that children prefer the green edges of the outdoor area, where there are trees and shrubs. Also, they enjoy building dens in sheltered areas outside classrooms. Further studies by Drown and Christensen (2014) and Maxwell et al (2008), found that children like small, natural settings better for dramatic play activities, as they are well away from areas where large scale motor activities, such as football and basketball, take place.

These are both areas which are often considered out of bounds to pupils, due to them being out of sight or inconvenient to staff. If staff ratio allows, it may be possible to incorporate these areas into a child's learning landscape, with adequate supervision, allowing children to express themselves more comfortably.

Some play styles can be problematic, due to staff not approving of them, or understanding the benefits. For example, rough and tumble or superhero play can be frowned upon due to the potential for injury and aggressive behaviour. However, when a staff member understands this type of play can teach conflict resolution, physical control and planned consideration for others, it suddenly becomes a good learning opportunity. When activities such as this are being performed in a safe environment, with the right level of staff training and involvement, they can be managed safely (Grimmer, 2019). It is Grimmer's view that rather than banning this type of play, practitioners should use the opportunity to talk to children about these aggressive behaviours and how best to deal with them, whilst protecting themselves from harm. If activities are banned, this could cause a barrier between the child and the adult and shut down any communication channels.

Observation Methods

The method of observation chosen for this discussion is the Leuven Scale. The scale was developed by Professor Ferre Laevers, from the University of Leuven in Belgium, and was designed to measure the levels of well-being and involvement of children in the Early Years Setting. The scale is observation based and suitable for use in a range of settings. Observations can be carried out as part of the daily routine, without being intrusive to children's play. Recommended observation time is two minutes and observations can be carried out in groups or individuals (Early Years Staffroom, 2024).

Professor Laevers believes the higher levels of wellbeing and involvement a child shows, the more effectively they will learn. The wellbeing scale focuses on how settled the child is in the environment, and monitors the spontaneity, self-confidence and vitality shown by the child. High levels indicate they feel safe and accepted in the environment. The second scale records the involvement level of the child. Deep levels of engagement indicate they are working to their full capability.

Wellbeing is measured on a scale of one to five. A child at level one will show discomfort, possibly crying. They may be withdrawn, aggressive, sad or dejected. They will not respond to the environment. At level two, body language or facial expressions may indicate uneasiness. This may not show all the time. Level three sees little or no emotion evident, neutral posture and blank facial expression. At level four there are obvious signs of satisfaction but varying in intensity. Level five shows a happy, smiling child, full of energy. They act spontaneously and are expressive in their play, possibly singing to themselves. They access the environment, showing no sign of stress and are confident and self-assured.

The involvement scale is similarly measured on a scale of one to five. Activity at level one will be repetitive and passive, with no energy shown. The child may stare into space, although this can sometimes be a sign of inner concentration. A level two child will be engaged in an activity for half the observation period but then be non-active and staring into space. Their involvement level is not strong enough to encourage a return to the activity and concentration is regularly interrupted. The level three child has a routine concentration level and can be easily distracted. They show no real signals of involvement and may lack energy. Level four children have intense moments of activity, with those activities having special meaning. A level four score can be given if the involvement signals are seen during the intense activity period. No stimuli from the surrounding area will be tempting enough to distract the child from their activity. They may return to the activity following interruption. Finally, at level five, a child will display continuous, intense activity and deep levels of involvement. Essential signs of involvement should be present throughout the whole observation period. These are: concentration, creativity, energy and persistence.

Unless a child is operating at either level four or five on both scales, their learning is considered ineffective, at which point intervention should be introduced. A child's levels of wellbeing and involvement can fluctuate throughout the day, and it may be necessary to repeat the observation if you feel they were not at their best.

Using the Leuven Scale at the start of the child's Early Years journey enables a practitioner to identify children whose well-being and engagement levels are low. This means early intervention can be organised to support them. The Leuven method focuses on the emotions and experiences of a child, rather than just their academic progress. This is important for holistic development and connects with the rights of the child, as per the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef 1989), by ensuring they have time to play and relax. Interventions may be as simple as adjusting the learning environment or the teaching method, to better suit the children identified. Once improvements are made, the child will be empowered and capable of actively participating in their own learning. Seeing the positive results achieved by using the Leuven Scale also empowers the practitioner, resulting in a continuous cycle of improvement. As with all aspects of Early Years, it is important to be reflective. The Leuven Scale encourages continuous reflection, so the best, most enriching experiences are provided for children.

An advantage of The Leuven Scale is that it is observation based, putting the child at the centre of their own learning. Observation based teaching has been shown to be the most effective method and forces practitioners to be reactive to a child's needs, adapting their methods as they go forward. A criticism however, is that it doesn't always work well for children with special needs or disabilities. Some of the scale behaviours are not always present in a child with SEN, or more particularly, mute children. The prescriptive nature of observations can be limiting when dealing with SEN children or children of different cultures, who may operate within different cultural expectations. A similar criticism was applied to Bowlby's Theory of Attachment.

The role of play when undertaking observations and assessments

When observing children, often the most detailed observations come from watching them play something of their own choice. Genuine play is intrinsic and self-led, meaning when a child chooses an activity following their own interests, they will likely stay at the activity for a lengthier time, showing higher levels of engagement. Louis (2022), writing for the Froebel Trust, states that educators gain better insight when observing children engaged in self-chosen play. The observations made provide information which can be used to assist in providing a learning environment which is responsive to what the children have been doing. Observation helps practitioners get to know children better, thus making better relationships with them.

Observing children in self-led play can assist practitioners in recognising a child's zone of proximal development, as stated by Vygotsky. This is the point at which a child's understanding or development level prevents them from continuing with their chosen activity, without needing support and input from an adult. Once this zone is recognised, it becomes easier for practitioners to plan for the child's next steps, so their learning can continue.

Besides meeting some of the outcomes in the EYFS Framework, it is possible to witness many of the Characteristics of Effective Learning in children's play. For example, finding new ways to do things, representing their experiences in play and showing high levels of involvement. The level of involvement shown links well with the use of the Leuven Scale, as discussed above. Good levels of involvement mean children are learning more effectively.

It is also useful to consider the play cycle (Sturrock & Else, 1998) when observing and to remember the procedure children follow when they begin to play. If the environment is stimulating to the child, this will cause the child to contemplate the possibilities of their play. When a play cue is followed and a response made, they will choose the context of their play, beginning to introduce physical props, narratives and rules. From this point on, things can change rapidly to follow the child's emotional state and it is therefore possible to gain observations on many different areas of the curriculum, as children alter their play to suit their mood. Play is emotional and when a child is in full flow with their

play, they may display elements relating to several curriculum areas and the longer the play lasts, the more knowledge they are likely to show. Play can last for seconds, hours or days, depending on the child's level of engagement, before they reach the annihilation stage and end the activity. If a child takes part in an activity set up for them by a practitioner, their interest may be more fleeting and not as in depth as if they initiated the activity themselves. This is supported by Howard and McInnes (2012), whose study states that children perform to a higher level when they see an activity as being 'like play'. Factors affecting children's view of what is 'play' and 'not play', can include the proximity of an adult, the location of the activity (floor or table) and whether they have been asked to do the activity, or given free choice as to whether they take part or not.

When observing children, it is important to remember that when they are engaged in an adult led or adult facilitated activity, they may not display the full extent of their knowledge. This is because they may not consider the activity as 'play', as it is not of their own choice. Additionally, adults tend to set up activities with the intention of securing a specific outcome. Children are quick to recognise this and often rush the activity to show they can do it, before leaving promptly to pursue their own interests.

Many observations are simply that – an observation, and no interaction is necessary. In some cases, however, to ascertain the child's full understanding of what they are doing, it can be necessary to ask a question or make a comment, such as 'I wonder what would happen if...' and walk away to see if they pursue your line of enquiry. Any questions should be open and require more than a one-word answer, giving the child a chance to explain their views. Having conversations with others allows children to use language in purposeful and meaningful ways. It builds their vocabulary skills and gives them a turn-taking structure to follow (Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012).

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