Children’s play: theory and practice

Portfolio

I have used generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in this work, Grammarly (2025) to assist grammatically, and Google Translate (2025) to support this work as an English as a Second Language.

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Section 1. Play Types: Imaginative and Physical Play

Play serves as a mechanism for fostering social connections and stimulating cortical activation, facilitating the development of neural pathways essential for motor, socio-emotional, and cognitive growth. Sustained engagement in play further reinforces these neural connections, contributing to the advancement of higher-order cognitive functions, coordination, and social competence (National Institute for Play, no date). Building on these benefits, the classification of play types seeks to encapsulate the wide spectrum of children's play behaviours and their potential influence on physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development (Play Wales, 2017).

The following discussion will explore two distinct types of play, examining their respective contributions to children's holistic development:

Imaginative Play

Imaginative play holds significant value, serving therapeutic, diagnostic, and cognitive developmental purposes (Moyles, 2010). This type of play is conceptualized as the construction of a fictional context in which children integrate real-world experiences and innovatively develop narrative structures, redefining the symbolic significance of objects and behaviours within their play interactions (Devi, Fleer and Li, 2018). Moreover, this form of play facilitates the refinement of technical competencies, enabling children to articulate, interpret, and reflect on their experiences, concepts, and emotions (Keough, 2024).

A practical example of imaginative play in an early years setting is a pretend shop scenario, where children assume roles such as the shopkeeper and customers. When multiple children express a preference for the same role, they must engage in negotiation, turn-taking, and conflict resolution to sustain the play experience (Ellis, 2016). This scenario aligns with Parten’s Stages of Play, specifically the cooperative play stage (concluding phase), in which children actively engage in structured social interactions, assume distinct roles, and collaboratively construct a shared narrative (Brodie, 2024).

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However, before reaching this stage, young children engage in solitary or parallel play, interacting with their environment independently or in proximity to peers without direct social involvement (Pathways, 2022). As their social and cognitive abilities develop, they transition to associative play, characterized by shared use of materials and emerging interactions, albeit without coordinated collaboration (Brodie, 2024).

This process reflects Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development, which posits that cognitive growth is facilitated through social interactions, with play serving as a fundamental context for fostering intellectual and social competencies (McLeod, 2024). In this scenario, children develop essential social and cognitive skills, including emotional regulation, problem-solving, and self-control, as they navigate role negotiation, key aspects of development identified by Vygotsky (Ellis, 2016; McLeod, 2024).

Physical Play

Physical play involves children engaging in purposeful activities that follow a developmental progression of essential movement patterns, strengthening the connection between the body and brain (Archer and Siraj, 2015). Engaging in physical activity is integral to the enhancement of children's overall health, cognitive development, and social-emotional well-being (Active Together, no date). Additionally, it facilitates both gross and fine motor skill development by improving core strength, balance, coordination, and spatial awareness while enhancing precision and hand-eye coordination, which are essential competencies for early literacy and writing proficiency (Department for Education, 2024).

To illustrate, a child who has recently developed the ability to crawl begins actively exploring their environment by advancing toward objects, grasping items, and adapting to different textures and surfaces. This early participation in physical play promotes the development of core stability, enhances motor coordination, and improves postural control, establishing a fundamental basis for subsequent gross motor milestones such as standing and walking (Archer and Siraj, 2015).

This setting aligns with Parten's Stages of Play (Pathways, 2022), particularly the initial phase of independent engagement (Solitary Play), in which children engage in independent play without direct interaction with peers. At this stage of development, children primarily focus on the refinement of motor skills, sensory perception, and cognitive processing, which serve as fundamental precursors to subsequent social engagement and interaction (Brodie, 2024).

Complementing this perspective, Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory (Simply Psychology, 2024), notably the Sensorimotor Stage (0-2 years), reinforces this viewpoint by emphasizing how infants develop understanding through sensory exploration and physical engagement with their environment. During this stage, such interactions foster an awareness of spatial relationships, object permanence, and cause-and-effect principles, all of which are fundamental for later problem-solving and social play (Hargraves, 2021).

Recognizing the significance of diverse forms of play is crucial for caregivers, as it enables them to implement pedagogical strategies that support holistic child development (Anon, 2022). In Wales, A Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings (Welsh Government, 2022) underscores the role of play-based learning in early childhood education. It advocates for engaging children in meaningful play experiences that promote physical activities, both indoors and outdoors, while also ensuring access to diverse resources that nurture creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

Furthermore, Parten's comprehensive study emphasizes the individual nature of children's developmental trajectories, highlighting the necessity for early years practitioners to implement play experiences that align with each child's unique pace of growth. A thorough comprehension of these stages enables educators to design pedagogical approaches that are both developmentally appropriate and responsive to individual learning needs (Thomas, 2023).

Section 2. Child Development Through Play

Play can take various modalities; it may be lively, unstructured, and socially interactive, or it can be subdued, purposeful, and individually directed (Pathways, 2023). The classification of play types serves as a beneficial framework for play practitioners; however, these categories are not fixed and may evolve as additional forms of play are identified. This categorization aims to encompass the broad spectrum of children's play behaviours and their potential impact on physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development (Play Wales, 2017).

Among these various forms, self-directed play is particularly significant, as it enables children to initiate, guide, and sustain their own play experiences without direct adult intervention (Play Wales, 2024). Unlike structured activities led by educators or caregivers, self-directed play allows children to independently explore their environment, select materials, determine their interests, and construct their play narratives. This autonomy fosters creativity, strategic thinking, and autonomous decision-making, all of which are essential for holistic development (UNICEF, 2022).

According to the National Institute for Play (no date), a key factor sustaining self-directed play is intrinsic motivation, as children naturally engage in activities that provide enjoyment and personal fulfilment. Driven by internal curiosity and individual interests, each child independently selects tasks that capture their attention. Since these activities originate from their innate drive, children are inclined to engage in them repeatedly, thereby reinforcing learning, skill acquisition, and deeper cognitive processing (The Montessori School of the Burkshires, 2024).

The Role of Practitioners in Understanding and Supporting Self-Directed Play in Early Years Settings

Self-directed play is a significant factor in early childhood development, fostering self-confidence, independence, and intrinsic motivation. Through independent exploration, children recognize their capabilities, develop autonomy in decision-making, and gain a sense of accomplishment (UNICEF, 2022). This type of play also stimulates the imagination as children create their narratives and invent new possibilities. By engaging in activities without predefined expectations, children learn at their own pace, constructing knowledge in ways that are meaningful to them (The Montessori School of the Burkshires, 2024).

To ensure ongoing support for children's development in the early years, The Playwork Principles (Play Wales, 2022) provide a conceptual foundation that emphasizes children's autonomy in play, advocating for self-directed and intrinsically motivated experiences. This perspective is further reinforced by the Welsh Assembly Government’s Play Policy (Play Wales, 2002), which translates these principles into practice by safeguarding access to enriching and thoughtfully designed play environments for all children in Wales. Practitioners can implement this approach to ensure that children feel secure and confident in making their own choices while also having access to stimulating materials that encourage creativity and discovery (Play Wales, 2024).

In addition, adults should act as facilitators rather than directors, offering support when needed without imposing structured outcomes. Through intentional planning and the careful selection of open-ended materials, practitioners can create play spaces that enable children to explore, take risks, and develop problem-solving skills at their own pace (The Montessori School of the Burkshires, 2024). For example, in a well-prepared environment that fosters independent exploration, a child might use loose parts such as wooden blocks, shells, and fabric to construct a miniature landscape, engaging in creative problem-solving and spatial reasoning (Play Wales, 2024).

Furthermore, play should be intrinsically motivated by a child’s enthusiasm and curiosity, occurring naturally without external pressure or the expectation of specific

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outcomes. This ensures that children engage in play for the sheer joy and satisfaction it brings rather than for assessment, achievement, or recognition (Play Wales, 2024).

This perspective aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Gowrie NSW, 2024), highlighting the role of play as a crucial driver of cognitive growth. It enables children to explore ideas, embrace diverse roles, and engage in analytical reasoning within a secure and encouraging environment. Through play, children develop advanced mental processes, expand their learning within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and enhance their ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and interact socially (Sprouts, 2020).

However, the nature of adult involvement must be carefully balanced to avoid shifting play toward an overly structured approach, as children are less prone to perceiving an activity as play when an adult is involved, particularly if that presence is directive rather than supportive (McInnes et al. 2011).

To maximize the benefits of self-directed play, practitioners must maintain a careful balance between guidance and autonomy (King and Sturrock, 2020). Over-structuring play risks shifting it toward an adult-led approach, diminishing the developmental advantages of child-led exploration and decision-making. A well-facilitated play environment ensures that children engage in meaningful learning experiences while retaining ownership of their play. By assuming a dynamic and responsive role, practitioners cultivate both individual autonomy and collaborative interactions, thereby facilitating deeper engagement, creativity, and the development of problem-solving competencies (Anon, 2022).

Section 3. Understanding Child Development Through Observation

According to Gowrie New South Wales (2023), observation in early childhood education involves systematically attending to children's activities by actively listening to and observing them as they engage in play, learning, and exploration. During this process, educators critically analyse children's actions, expressions, behaviours, and gestures to gain insights into their development and needs. Carefully observing children's learning, as well as understanding their thoughts and emotions, provides valuable insights that inform and shape the immediate experiences of early childhood learners across diverse educational settings (Smidt, 2015).

Observation in early childhood education should encompass both structured (planned) and unstructured (spontaneous) approaches, carried out continuously during interactions with children (Gina and Emily, 2020). Without systematic observation, curriculum planning may rely on subjective perceptions of what is engaging, enjoyable, or relevant rather than on a child's actual developmental needs. Regular and purposeful observation ensures that educational practice remains child-centred, evidence-based, and responsive to individual learning trajectories (Rosa, 2015).

In alignment with the Curriculum for Wales guidance (Welsh Government, 2022), observation plays a crucial role in developing ambitious and capable learners by ensuring that teaching and learning experiences are tailored to individual needs. The curriculum prioritises nurturing independent, motivated, and resilient learners who actively engage in their development. Through continuous observation, practitioners derive valuable insights into children's strengths, interests, and developmental needs, enabling them to design targeted learning opportunities that foster curiosity, problem-solving, and perseverance (NAEYC, 2025). By adapting teaching approaches based on these observations, educators create environments that promote confidence and autonomy. Additionally, by recognizing children's evolving interests and tailoring learning experiences accordingly, observation fosters intrinsic motivation, encouraging a sustained enthusiasm for discovery, exploration, and knowledge acquisition, key principles underpinning the Ambitious and Capable

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Learners framework in the Curriculum for Wales guidance (Welsh Government, 2022).

Anecdotal Record Observation in Early Years Settings

An anecdotal record is a structured, descriptive account documented after a specific behaviour or interaction has been observed. Often described as diary-style observations, these records follow a chronological sequence, capturing the context, key events, and outcomes of the child's experience. They serve as a valuable tool for practitioners in designing targeted learning experiences, facilitating communication with families, and identifying potential developmental concerns (Obano and Enowoghomwenma, 2021). For instance, during free play, a practitioner observed a child repeatedly connecting and disconnecting magnetic building tiles, carefully aligning the edges and testing different shapes. This observation illustrated the child's developing problem-solving abilities (Administration for Children and Families, 2015).

When documenting an anecdotal record, it is essential to capture the child's verbal expressions, non-verbal indicators, kinesics movements, and facial expressions to provide a comprehensive account of their interactions and behaviours (Gowrie New South Wales, 2023). These observations can be recorded during the child’s activities or at the end of the day, with flexible and user-friendly formats ensuring effective data collection (Obano and Enowoghomwenma, 2021). Additionally, essential details such as the child's name, date, location, a brief summary of the observation, and the practitioner's name should be recorded (Administration for Children and Families, 2015).

Benefits and Limitations of Anecdotal Record Observation

Anecdotal records provide valuable insights into a child's developmental journey by capturing significant behaviours, interactions, and learning experiences. They offer practitioners a structured yet flexible method of collecting observational data, which informs curriculum planning and supports individualized learning approaches (Obano and Enowoghomwenma, 2021).

In addition to guiding educational strategies, anecdotal records contribute to strengthening communication between practitioners and families (Woodbury, 2024). By documenting specific examples of a child’s progress, these records provide parents with a clearer understanding of their child’s experiences within the educational environment. During discussions or conferences, practitioners can use these observations to highlight achievements, address concerns, and collaborate with families to support the child's development (Bates, Schenck, and Hoover, 2019).

Furthermore, maintaining anecdotal records also enables practitioners to systematically track developmental milestones and assess growth across multiple domains, including physical, cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional competencies. By identifying emerging patterns and individual learning needs, practitioners can tailor their support strategies to enhance children's overall development and well-being (Brightwheel, 2024).

However, despite their numerous benefits, anecdotal records have certain limitations that must be considered in early years practice, such as lack of real-time documentation, as they are often written after the observed event, which may result in missing crucial details or unintentional inaccuracies (Prevost, 2024). While anecdotal records offer valuable qualitative insights, they may not encompass a full, holistic assessment of a child's development, as the observer's presence can influence the child's natural behaviour, potentially affecting the authenticity of the observation (Kurt, 2020). Moreover, the demands on practitioners' time can affect the precision and reliability of anecdotal records, as they must manage multiple responsibilities simultaneously, which may hinder their ability to document every meaningful interaction comprehensively (Bates, Schenck, and Hoover, 2019).

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To enhance the effectiveness of anecdotal records, practitioners should prioritize objective and unbiased observations, focusing on specific behaviours rather than personal interpretations (Woodbury, 2024). A structured approach to implementing anecdotal observations involves organising the class into peer groups and establishing a fixed schedule for the systematic observation of each group. This method ensures systematic record-keeping and reduces the likelihood of overlooking any child's developmental progress. Additionally, these observations naturally transition into the next critical phase of assessment, where practitioners evaluate children's progress to inform individualized learning and development (Bates, Schenck and Hoover, 2019).

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Section 4. Observation, Assessment, and Play-based in the Early Years Setting

Each child's developmental and learning journey is uniquely structured, encompassing multiple interconnected elements that contribute to their overall growth, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to early years education (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021).

Observation provides a comprehensive understanding of a child's interests, strengths, and facets for growth, while assessment allows practitioners to effectively support children's development when they have a clear understanding of each child's current stage in relation to learning goals (Nursery, 2023). According to Drummond (1998), observation should be used as a tool to appreciate and understand children's unique capabilities rather than merely identifying gaps in their learning. This strengths-based approach enables practitioners to recognize children's potential, inform meaningful assessments, and create learning environments that foster engagement, confidence, and holistic development (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021).

Effective assessment involves systematically evaluating a child's progress, learning, and developmental needs to inform future planning. Assessment for learning, a formative process, relies on ongoing observations to shape instructional decisions and support individualized learning experiences (Rosa, 2015). To ensure accuracy and inclusivity, assessments should be developmentally appropriate, culturally relevant, linguistically inclusive, and aligned with each child's stage of learning (Obano & Enowoghomwenma, 2021).

Play-based assessment is among the most beneficial and developmentally appropriate ways to observe and assess children. This approach enables children to demonstrate their learning in meaningful contexts, offering a more comprehensive and authentic representation of their progress than standardized evaluations. As play fosters inquiry and self-expression, it serves as a valuable tool for formative assessment, allowing educators to dynamically observe and track developmental progress in real-time (Pyle et al. 2023).

Observing children in play-based settings provides rich insights into their development, particularly in cognitive, social, and emotional domains. In contrast to structured assessments, which may create pressure or limit a child's natural responses, play-based observations offer a more accurate reflection of children's abilities in an engaging and familiar environment (Kurt, 2020). Research indicates that children experience greater emotional well-being and engagement in learning when activities are interpreted as enjoyable experiences rather than formal assessments, making play-based observations a more reliable measure of their developmental stage (Howard and McInnes, 2013).

To illustrate, in an early years setting, a practitioner observed a typically reserved child actively engaging in imaginative restaurant play, demonstrating advanced verbal communication and social interaction skills. These abilities, which were not evident in formal assessments, illustrate how play-based observation provides a natural and low-pressure context for children to authentically exhibit their competencies, resulting in a more accurate and comprehensive assessment of their development (NHS, 2023).

This method is consistent with the Assessment Arrangements for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings (Welsh Government, no date) policy, which highlights the importance of formative assessment through observation as an indispensable practice in tracking children's development in early childhood education. The framework promotes a child-centred, play-driven learning environment, where practitioners evaluate progress in a comprehensive manner rather than depending on formalized assessments. Systematic analysis of these observations enables educators to identify areas of curiosity and engagement, facilitating scaffolding strategies that support the transition from guided learning to independent competence (Smidt, 2015).

Play-based Learning: The Practitioner's Role

Early childhood practitioners and caregivers play a pivotal role in nurturing young children's learning and development through play-based experiences (McLean, K. *et al.* 2023). To effectively support children's play-based learning, practitioners must recognize the importance of children's interpretation of play and employ reflective strategies to assess the playfulness of learning experiences. This approach positions them to create environments that foster engagement and enjoyment, supporting optimal emotional well-being and maximizing developmental opportunities across multiple domains (Howard and McInnes, 2013).

Additionally, the principles of the Foundation Phase Framework (Welsh Government, 2015) emphasize the importance of emotional development and well-being as fundamental aspects of early childhood education. Furthermore, the framework emphasizes the importance of integrating different types of play alongside a broad spectrum of structured and child-initiated activities to foster holistic learning and overall development.

To effectively observe play, practitioners must adopt a balanced approach, identifying the appropriate moments to actively engage in children's learning experiences or step back to foster peer collaboration and self-directed problem-solving (McDonald, 2018). This perspective aligns with the Reggio Emilia philosophy, which emphasises that practitioners gain deeper insight into children's cognitive and social abilities by stepping back and observing. This reflective approach leads to a fundamental shift in their role from instructors to collaborative facilitators (Gregory, 2023). A profound understanding of each child enables educators to effectively balance their role in facilitating engagement, fostering motivation, and providing appropriate levels of challenge to support holistic development (Gina and Emily, 2020). By carefully evaluating each child's individual needs, educators can apply scaffolding, tailoring their support to progressively encourage autonomy. This approach not only facilitates cognitive growth but also strengthens social interaction and peer collaboration, enabling children to construct knowledge through shared experiences (Gregory, 2023). Rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, this method

underscores the significance of guided learning, where social engagement and structured support significantly contribute to children’s holistic development (McLeod, 2024).

In conclusion, effective observation in early childhood education must align with its purpose, the developmental domain being assessed, and ethical considerations. Using multiple observation methods enables practitioners to effectively monitor development, implement targeted support, and refine instructional strategies, ensuring comprehensive documentation and a deeper understanding of a child's development (Gina and Emily, 2020).

Furthermore, play-based observation offers a comprehensive and authentic representation of a child's development by capturing natural engagement in meaningful contexts (Pyle et al. 2023). Adhering to ethical standards, including informed consent, privacy protection, and the minimisation of bias, is crucial in maintaining fairness and integrity in assessment (NSPCC, 2023). Such practices align with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2019), which emphasises young children's rights to dignity, privacy, and meaningful participation in decisions that affect their development and learning.

By integrating ethical integrity with practical effectiveness, observation becomes a critical tool for enhancing play-based learning, promoting engagement, and supporting holistic child development (Kids Care Club, 2022; Pyle et al. 2023).

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