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Portfolio

1. Discuss two types of play and how these can be supported in practice.

Play is a fundamental part of children's learning and development. It supports physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth, allowing children to explore their environment and make sense of the world around them. Different types of play contribute to different areas of development and provide valuable learning opportunities. It is important that all children are given the chance to play and given the time and space to delve into deep play. During this time, they will be fully engrossed in their own versions of learning, discovery, and creative exploration. Play at this level cannot be achieved if children continue to be interrupted, distracted, or redirected by practitioners or adults, as these interruptions prevent children from reaching the depth of engagement and focus needed for meaningful learning. (Moyle, 2022, p.33). This essay will discuss two types of play and examine how they can be effectively supported in practice to promote children's overall development.

The first play type I have chosen is exploratory play which is also sometimes known as sensory play. According to Play Wales (2017), exploratory play entails learning through object manipulation, such as handling or tossing clay or deconstructing and fixing a bicycle to observe how it functions. Exploratory play is beneficial for children's fine motor skills as they reach for different objects and use their hands to squish, roll, and hold them. This play can also help children with their speech and language skills by coming across new objects and adults showing an interest in naming the objects they have picked up. (Twinkl, 2021).

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In practice, exploratory play can be supported by providing a range of stimulating and safe materials such as sand, water, playdough, natural objects, textured fabrics, and loose parts. Practitioners should create an enabling environment where children feel safe to explore without fear of making mistakes. Adults play an important role by observing children's interests and extending their learning through open-ended questions and meaningful interactions. For example, practitioners can introduce new vocabulary and encourage children to think about what they are doing and why. They can do this by carefully planning sensory rich experiences and engaging positively with children during play, practitioners can effectively support exploratory play and enhance children's overall development.

The next type of play I have chosen is imaginative play, Play Wales (2017) says that imaginative play is based on reality but isn't real and is in fact made up, such as acting like a plant, pretending to be a leopard, or having a pretend friend. Through imaginative play children are able to take control of their own experiences, helping them feel a sense of calm and stability. Children that engage in imaginative play have the opportunities to participate in activities that allow them the chance to problem solve, and make sense of the world they live in. Imaginative play is usually based on events that have already happened to the children, an example of this would be acting out situations that happened at school or at home. (Waters-Davies, 2022, p. 19).

The Department for Education (2022) states that to support children's imagination in practice practitioners should provide a wide range of open-ended and stimulating materials such as fabrics, fastenings, and found objects which allow children to create, roleplay, and explore creatively. Imaginative experiences are supported when children are given time and freedom to respond at their own pace, without a set outcome, encouraging them to explore and show experiences in their own way. Practitioners

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should notice, value, and extend each child's imaginative ideas, using their knowledge of the child to plan activities that inspire further creativity and imagination.

In conclusion, both exploratory and imaginative play are essential for children's learning and development. Exploratory play allows children to develop fine motor skills, problem-solving skills, and speech and language through hands-on interaction with materials. While imaginative play supports creativity, expressing emotions, and understanding of the world around them. Practitioners play a crucial role in supporting these types of play by providing safe, stimulating environments, offering appropriate materials, observing children's interests, and engaging in meaningful interactions. By valuing and extending children's ideas and allowing them the freedom to explore and use their imagination at their own pace. By doing these practitioners promote holistic development and help foster a love of learning that will benefit children throughout their education and future.

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.

Play is a vital part of childhood and plays a key role in children's overall development. Through play children can explore new ideas, act out real-life experiences, express their feelings and develop new skills. In the early years especially play supports children's social skills, communication and language skills, problem-solving skills and emotional development. Play also helps children build confidence, develop friendships and feel a sense of independence (Sawyers, Addye & Sawyers, 2021). Giving children the opportunity to choose their own play, also known as child-led or free play is extremely important. When children are able to follow their own interests, they are more motivated and more engaged in what they are doing meaning they are more engaged in

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learning. Being able to choose their own play helps children develop independence and confidence because they are making decisions for themselves. They learn how to play with others, problem solve, take risks, and to be creative. The Early Years Foundation Stage framework highlights that children learn best when they are actively involved in their learning, and free play allows this to happen naturally (Gov.uk, 2018). Although child-led play is essential and encouraged, adults still play an important role in children's play. The role of the adult is not to control the play but to support and extend it when appropriate. Adults should carefully observe children to understand their interests and developmental needs. They are responsible for creating an enabling environment with suitable resources that encourage exploration and imagination. Vygotsky believed that adults could support children's learning through something known as 'scaffolding'. This means offering support when needed and gradually stepping back as the child becomes more confident, the same concept as scaffolding being removed from a building during construction (The Open University, n.d). For example, if a child is pretending to be a firefighter, an adult could ask open-ended questions such as, "What does a firefighter need to do to keep people safe?". This helps the child learn about the people that help us and extends the child's learning without fully taking over the play. Adults should look for "teachable moments" but avoid interrupting children's ideas or directing the play unnecessarily. The play cycle also explains different levels of adult involvement in play. The first level is play maintenance, this would be where children are fully engaged and adults simply observe. Next, would be simple intervention where the adult may provide resources when requested by children. Medial intervention comes next, this happens when a child invites the adult into their play and adults join but take a step back when another child has joined. Lastly, complex intervention this involves a greater level of adult intervention, this is usually when adults are heavily involved in the child's play and guidance or support is needed (King & Sturrock, 2019). Understanding these stages helps practitioners know when to step in and get involved and when to step back. Overall, allowing children to choose

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their own play is very important and encouraged deeply especially in education. It supports children's holistic development and helps them to learn in a way that is more engaging for them, meaning they are more likely to take in what they have learnt. Also, although the role of the adult is important in a child's play it's also just as important to remember not to constantly interrupt. Observe from a distance and wait for the play cues before involving yourself in their play. As if interrupted children can lose concentration, become less engaged, and feel less in control of their play. Having a balanced approach enables children to learn in a way that is both developmentally appropriate and deeply engaging, therefore this is what every adult especially practitioners should aim for.

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

Observing children is a fundamental and crucial part of early years that is used in everyday practice. It enables practitioners to fully understand how each individual child develops, learns, and progresses (Birthto5matters, 2021). Observations help to make informed decisions on the steps that should be taken to help children develop further and understand the best ways to help them. They can also help practitioners notice early on if a child might need extra support, so help can be put in place as soon as possible. Observations also help build strong relationships with parents and carers, as they give clear examples of what their child is doing and how they are getting on. This makes it easier to work together to support the child. Overall, observations help practitioners plan activities, check progress, and improve the way they support children in the setting. It's important to remember that observations and assessments are not tests and they are simply to know how each child is learning and developing and how to help them if needed. (Smidt, 2021, p.n 30-32).

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The method I have chosen to discuss is the Leuven Scale, which was developed by professor Ferre, Laevers (Main, 2021). This is a five-point scale used to measure children's well-being and involvement. Practitioners use the scale to observe and assess where a child falls in each area. If a child consistently shows low levels of well-being and involvement, this may indicate that there is a risk to their development. In contrast, when a child regularly demonstrates high levels of well-being and involvement, it suggests that effective learning and development are taking place. This observation technique is widely used in early years settings and is liked by many. In practice, a practitioner will watch a child for a set period of time usually around 2–5 minutes and then rate their wellbeing and involvement on the five-point scale. If a child scores low then a practitioner needs to assess why this could be, for example the activity may be too easy or hard, therefore the activity needs to be adjusted accordingly. If the practitioner believes that the child needs additional support then parents/guardians will be informed and steps will be taken to contact the appropriate professionals to get the help the child may need, this could be speech and language, health visitor, or occupational therapist.

Like every educational strategy the Leuven scale has its advantages and disadvantages, one of the main advantages being that the child is constantly the centre of the learning process. Instead of only focusing on the children's academic outcomes this scale focuses on their social, and emotional well-being. It promotes a holistic understanding of development which is a vital part of a child's education. Also, it provides a structured and beneficial approach to assessing learning and engagement. It offers a consistent framework that parents and childcare providers can use to measure well-being and involvement levels. Another advantage would be that the scale discourages teaching in a "one size fits all" manner. Instead, it encourages practitioners to be reflective, accepting and adaptive in order to meet the requirements of each child. This makes sure that rather than strict academic expectations, teaching methods are

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influenced by the children's well-being and engagement alone (Learning Journals, 2021).

One of the main disadvantages of the scale is that it does not always account effectively for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Some of the observable behaviours used to assess involvement and wellbeing may not be clearly demonstrated by SEND children, particularly those who are non-verbal. As a result, the scale may not always provide an accurate representation of their engagement or learning. Another disadvantage is that it may not fully consider cultural differences in children's behaviour. Different cultures have different expectations about how children show engagement, emotions, and interaction. Because of this, some behaviours used to measure well-being, and involvement may not look the same across all cultural groups. This is similar to concerns that were said about the work of John Bowlby, whose attachment theory has been criticised for cultural differences. In the same way, the Leuven Scale may not always reflect culturally diverse ways that children express involvement and wellbeing therefore is not accurate for every individual child. (Learning Journals, 2021).

In conclusion, the Leuven Scale provides valuable insight into a child's wellbeing and involvement, which are essential for effective learning. By focusing on emotional security and engagement, it supports a more holistic approach than methods that only assess academic skills. However, it does not measure all areas of development, such as language, physical, or cognitive milestones. Therefore, while it contributes to a holistic understanding of the child, it is most effective when used alongside other observation methods to show a deeper understanding on the overall development of a child. Here is a video that explains the Leuven scale in more depth:

<https://youtu.be/iUTLV5CBdwE?si=R9TQB8rKUXTo63L>

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.

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Observing and assessing children is an important part of early years because it helps practitioners understand where children are in their development and the best ways they can support them. The way children are observed can make a big difference to how engaged they are and how well their skills are being reflected, therefore it's crucial to find the right observation/assessment method for each child as one won't work for all. Children learn best through play, as it is their most natural and comfortable way of exploring the world around them. Children are typically more relaxed, confident, and focused while they are playing. They can demonstrate a variety of skills through play, such as social, problem-solving, communication, and physical coordination. Therefore, if children are observed through play you are likely to see more of what they are actually capable of, in oppose to if they were being observed doing written work etc. This essay explore why play is so important when observing and assessing children, and if it gives a more accurate picture of their development, and how adults can support play in a way that leads to meaningful and reliable observations.

According to Smidt (2015), play is important when observing and assessing children because it is the natural way in which they learn and make sense of the world. Jean Piaget's theory described children as active learners who gain knowledge through hands-on experiences and self-directed activity. This means that when children are playing, they are actively exploring, experimenting and building an understanding. Lev Vygotsky also viewed play as crucial to development, he believed that learning happens through social interaction. Therefore, observing children during play can provide a more accurate and meaningful picture of both their abilities and their development.

Adults can support accurate observation and assessment by allowing children to lead their own play and knowing when to step back. Standing back gives children the opportunity to show what they can do independently without adult interference, if adults interrupt children's play, then they are essentially interrupting they're learning as

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well. Also, creating an enabling environment with accessible, open-ended resources helps to encourage meaningful play and allows children to demonstrate a wide range of skills. Research by Howard and McInnes supports the importance of child-led, playful learning, suggesting that when play is not over-directed by adults, children show higher levels of engagement, which leads to more accurate and meaningful observations. According to their study, children's emotional well-being was higher when they thought an activity was play than when they thought it wasn't. The way the work was presented affected the children's level of engagement and enthusiasm, even if the activity itself remained the same. The results suggest that play is not only about the activity but also how children experience it, and that fostering playful environments might help kids' emotional growth and well-being (Howard & McInnes, 2013).

In conclusion, play is very important for observing and assessing children because it lets them show their skills naturally without a pressure to perform. Play-based observation reflects children's development more effectively because it captures their self-directed learning in a way that they feel comfortable and a sense of safety. Therefore, focusing on play in observation and assessment is essential for understanding children's abilities, supporting their development, and planning what next steps need to be taken to help support each individual child's development.

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