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Children's Play: Theory and Practice.

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Children's Play: Theory and Practice.

According to the Welsh Government (2019), play is characterised by children's behaviour that is chosen freely, directed personally, and motivated intrinsically. Play occurs without any external goals or rewards and is a fundamental aspect of healthy development.

Exploratory play:

Play Wales (2021) suggests that exploratory play involves engaging with an object or area, manipulating or moving it to assess its properties, possibilities, and content. Building on this, Action for Children (2022) explains that exploratory play includes activities that engage all five senses: touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste. Exploratory play helps children interact with and understand the world around them. This type of play is essential for children's learning and development, as much of their knowledge is gained through sensory experiences that aid in information retention.

Community Playthings (2019) points out that exploratory play involves activities that enable children to explore materials stimulating their senses, such as yoga, dancing, sand play, and finger painting. While some practitioners may hesitate to promote this type of play due to the mess or noise, it is essential to recognise the valuable benefits it can provide when managed effectively. Furthermore, by establishing clear guidelines and creating a conducive environment, children can engage deeply in sensory exploration. This interaction enhances their visual, auditory, olfactory (sense of smell), kinaesthetic, and gustatory (sense of taste) perceptions. Children's innate curiosity drives their desire to experience the world around them, and exploratory play is vital for supporting their cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural development.

According to A Country Garden (2023), the Montessori theory is based on key principles that challenge traditional education methods. A significant concept is learning through play, suggesting that children learn best when engaged in enjoyable

activities. Another important aspect is the focus on sensory development, and how children learn effectively through their senses. Montessori environments are designed to stimulate these senses, promoting active learning through various sensory materials and lessons. Exploratory play aligns closely with the Montessori method and the various stages of play.

Understanding the Montessori stages of play during exploratory play, The Montessori Academy (2022) explains that the stage of unoccupied play, which lasts from birth to around three months, is the first stage of play in early childhood. Often referred to as free play, this stage does not involve adults or other children to initiate activities and serves as the foundation for later types of play. During this unstructured phase, infants engage in sensory experiences that are vital for their development. As the child develops, the stages of play seen during exploratory play will transition to solitary play, where children can play independently, to parallel, associative, and cooperative play. Exploratory play is an excellent way to observe children during their developmental milestones (Montessori Academy, 2022).

Dramatic Play:

Lucky Beans Childcare (2024) believes that dramatic play, often referred to as pretend play or role play, is an essential component of early childhood education that greatly enhances children's development. In this type of play, children take on various roles and act out different scenarios, which can range from everyday situations, such as playing house, to imaginative themes like being astronauts or superheroes.

Dramatic play encourages children to put themselves in others' shoes, practice empathy, and develop social skills in a safe environment (Salma, 2023). Participating in dramatic play requires children to communicate, listen, and negotiate roles, which is a fantastic way to enhance their communication skills. A key benefit of dramatic play is learning to work together, share, and collaborate. It embodies teamwork in its most enjoyable form. Additionally, dramatic play helps children to understand and express their feelings, thereby improving their emotional intelligence and assisting them in handling real-life situations. By taking on different roles, children learn to see

the world from various perspectives, fostering empathy and shaping them into compassionate individuals (Salma, 2023).

According to My Teaching Cupboard (2021), Piaget was a Swiss Psychologist during the early 1900s, who developed theories of cognitive development based on his observations of children. Piaget's theories highlight the idea that children learn through play. His theory consists of four stages: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational. Dramatic play is most commonly observed during the preoperational stage (2-7 years), where children begin to associate objects with words. In this stage, their use and representation of objects often lack adult logic. Piaget observed that children in this stage engage in imaginative play to represent objects, and they develop their conceptual knowledge through pretending and dramatic play.

The Steiner Connection (2022) suggests that self-directed play is defined as a form of play that is initiated and guided by the child. This type of play is inspired by various elements within the child's environment, frequently including objects that capture their interest. It is distinct from playful learning, where educational objectives are often embedded within playful activities. In self-directed play, the motivation to engage arises naturally from the child, enabling them to establish their own rules and create a unique fantasy world.

Similarly, Wildlings Forest School (2024) believes that in self-directed play, children take the lead in directing their own play experiences. They choose the games, activities, and toys that interest them, fostering autonomy and independence. Instead of practitioners directing the play, they observe and support as needed, allowing for creative exploration. Self-directed play values the interests of the children and their natural curiosity, helping them develop problem-solving, decision-making, and emotional regulation skills.

According to Play Like Mum (2023), a practitioner's presence during play can provide safety and security for children. However, it can also serve as a potential influence on a child's play experiences through the transmission of projected thoughts and feelings.

Connect Childcare (2024) suggests that in self-directed play, practitioners play a critical role in organising a safe and stimulating physical environment. This involves providing access to a diverse range of open-ended resources and loose parts that encourage exploration and creativity. It is essential to establish a supportive atmosphere in which children feel empowered to share their ideas and experiment without the fear of judgment.

Practitioners should effectively demonstrate routines, and structure the daily schedule to allow sufficient time for self-directed play (Connect Childcare, 2024). In addition, practitioners should aim to teach practical skills and illustrate safe handling techniques for tools and equipment, thereby promoting both safe play and confidence among children. By embracing these roles, practitioners enhance children's learning experiences and foster curiosity, creativity, and collaboration.

Play Wales (2021) believes play is primarily a process of self-directed learning for children, making it valid for all ages. It is such a crucial aspect of a child's life that their ability to develop positively will be hindered if they are denied free access to a variety of environments and play opportunities. The freedom and child-centred nature of play make it an effective and comprehensive learning experience.

Self-directed play is vital for children's physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being (Welsh Government, 2023). It enhances their immediate happiness and supports their development. Through self-directed play, children socialise, build friendships, and learn to navigate conflicts, fostering respect and tolerance. Self-directed play also cultivates resilience by improving emotional regulation, confidence, creativity, and problem-solving skills, enabling children to cope with challenges. Self-directed play contributes to overall health and happiness while helping children to connect with their communities and develop a sense of identity. Ultimately, self-directed play plays a crucial role in learning and development, building brain structures, and fostering essential skills (Welsh Government, 2023).

Discussing the disadvantages of self-directed play, Raising Stars Early Learning Centre (2025) suggests that there are structural challenges associated with self-directed play. Practitioners can often struggle to engage all children equally during playtime, which can be attributed to factors such as time constraints and large class

sizes. Additionally, self-directed play may not be effective for every child; for instance, naturally, children may find it difficult to participate in collaborative play and could become disinterested in activities.

Another challenge is that some parents may not understand the importance of play in education. It is not uncommon for parents to criticise the frequent incorporation of play-based learning in the curriculum, believing that traditional academic programmes provide a more suitable model for education (Raising Stars Early Learning Centre, 2025).

According to West Sussex County Council (2021), observation, assessment and planning are critical components in fostering a child's growth and learning journey. This process of effective planning starts with careful observation of children, which allows practitioners and educators to gain a deeper understanding of each child's unique interests, developmental milestones, and individual learning styles. By closely monitoring how children interact with their environment and peers, practitioners can identify specific areas where a child excels or may need additional support. This comprehensive understanding is essential for designing tailored activities and educational experiences that resonate with each child's strengths and curiosity, ultimately promoting a more enriched and supportive learning experience.

The Welsh Assembly Government (2008) support this view by stating that observing children should be an essential part of the daily routine for practitioners working within the foundation phase. Observation should be integrated into the overall procedures of the setting or school, rather than being a standalone activity. Through observation and assessment, practitioners can understand each child's unique strengths, interests, and needs. This process helps in planning the child's progress and highlighting their development and abilities across all areas of learning. Additionally, The Welsh Assembly Government (2008) believe that observation allows for a graduated response and specific support for children whose progress may not be adequate and who could be on the continuum of additional learning needs. Furthermore, observations inform children about their achievements and the next steps in their learning. Observations also provide valuable feedback to staff and

parents or caregivers regarding the child's accomplishments and future learning directions.

Schedule of Growing Skills (SOGS):

Explaining the Schedule of Growing Skills (SOGS) observation, Shropshire Community Health (2022) states that the SOGS is an assessment tool for children from birth to five years of age, evaluating eight key developmental areas:

Locomotor Skills- Assesses movement abilities like crawling, walking, jumping, and focusing on balance and coordination.

Manipulative Skills- Evaluates fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination through activities like stacking blocks and drawing.

Visual Skills- Measures a child's ability to interpret visual information, including tracking and recognising shapes and colours.

Hearing and Language Skills- Assesses auditory processing and early language acquisition, including sound interpretation and comprehension.

Speech and Language Skills- Examines expressive and repetitive language abilities, vocabulary, and communication effectiveness.

Interactive Social Skills- Evaluate engagement with peers and adults, including sharing, taking turns, and emotional expression during play.

Self-care Skills- Focuses on a child's ability to perform personal tasks independently, fostering confidence and independence.

Cognitive Skills- Measures mental processes like problem-solving and understanding concepts.

SOGS helps practitioners track child development, identify delays, and provide timely support (Shropshire Community Health, 2022).

WJEC (2019) believe that the SOGS observation method is beneficial as the observation can be conducted at any time with children from birth to five years old, allowing practitioners to observe and assess when needed. This approach uses a

simple scoring system that can highlight developmental areas where a child may experience delays, including where referrals may be necessary.

Taylor & Francis (2020) believe that the Hawthorne effect is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when children modify their behaviour due to the awareness that they are being observed. This is a limitation of most observation methods and should be considered when observing, as children could limit their play and behaviour for fear that it is not the right way to play and behave. The behaviour change can significantly alter the findings of the observation, as the findings may not represent the child's typical conduct in their everyday environments. Instead of offering practitioners authentic insights into their usual play behaviour, the child's behaviour can become a performance, as the desire to make a good impression takes over.

Connect Childcare (2023) suggests that the SOGS observation method is child-centred, strengths-based, gives a holistic view of the child, and can greatly enrich the learning environment, leading to significantly positive outcomes for children. The Schedule of Growing Skills offers a comprehensive framework that allows practitioners to monitor a child's progress across a wide range of developmental domains. This thorough tracking system aids in pinpointing specific areas where a child may need support or intervention, ensuring that no child is left without the attention they require. This observation method allows practitioners to consider each child as a unique individual, considering their interests, strengths and milestones. As practitioners engage with children's experiences and behaviours, they gain insights into their learning styles and needs, which helps create a tailored educational approach. Furthermore, Connect Childcare (2023) believes that this emphasis on a well-rounded balance of a child's development not only prepares them for upcoming learning opportunities but also fosters resilience and adaptability. The SOGS approach to observation is thorough and ensures children are equipped with the foundational skills they need to thrive in the future.

However, Class Ace (2023) suggests that to observe a child thoroughly and meaningfully, a practitioner needs to dedicate significant time and focus for the SOGS method to be completed. In a busy environment filled with energetic children, this level of detailed observation can be difficult, and practitioners often find

themselves juggling various tasks and ensuring child safety while completing the observation, potentially missing important details.

When observing and assessing children, Starting Blocks (2024) believe that engaging in play provides children with a range of enriching experiences that are essential for their development. During collaborative play, children learn to communicate and work with their peers, honing their ability to share ideas and negotiate solutions. This interactive process encourages them to make choices and decisions that can impact their play, fostering a sense of independence and responsibility. Moreover, as children navigate various challenges and successes in their play activities, they build their self-confidence. For instance, successfully completing a challenging puzzle or winning a game can boost their self-esteem, while facing setbacks teaches them resilience. Play also serves as a vital outlet for emotional expression. Through imaginative scenarios, children can act out their feelings, giving them a safe space to process their emotions. Additionally, Starting Blocks (2023) says that engaging in play alongside others cultivates empathy and a sense of fairness. Children learn the importance of taking turns, sharing resources, and considering the perspectives of their friends. These interactions are fundamental in helping children develop social skills and moral values as they build friendships and navigate their social environments. Observing children during play is a key aspect of completing the SOGS observation method, ensuring the evaluation of all eight key areas (Shropshire Community Health, 2022).

The Voice of Early Childhood (2023) suggests that observing children during play, allows practitioners to see them in various environments. Over time, this range of observations created an invaluable holistic view of the child. When practitioners take the time to observe, they can see how play reveals the child's authentic voice. During play, children naturally express their thoughts, feelings and ideas. Additionally, play provides them with a safe space to express their true selves. In the setting, practitioners can also observe children responding to their environment and peers. Nevertheless, the play remains their most genuine form of expression in any situation. With an understanding of the child's authentic voice, practitioners can better support, scaffold, repeat, or enhance a child's learning experience.

Learning Through Play (2017) suggests that a substantial body of research indicates a connection between children's play and their learning and development. The evidence supporting this relationship comes from various disciplines, with much of the research on play within development psychology has been influenced by the theoretical writings of Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky argued that during spontaneous, child-initiated play, children gain control over their activities, set appropriate challenges for themselves, and create their zone of proximal development, where their learning is significantly enhanced.

Pentagon Play (2022) believe that child-led learning fosters independence and initiative in children by giving them the freedom to choose how they wish to engage in play. In this approach, children are encouraged to set their own goals and challenges, allowing them to take ownership of their learning journey. When needed, practitioners can provide support, but their primary role should be to observe and understand each child's unique learning process. An Adept practitioner recognises the importance of following a child's lead; they begin by closely watching the child's actions and interactions without immediate intervention. At first glance, it may appear that a child is struggling or in need of assistance, however, upon deeper observation, it often becomes clear that the child is engaged in deep, meaningful play. A practitioner should be flexible in adapting to their environment, stepping in only to enhance the child's experience or understanding.

TSW Training (2022) states that creating a supportive environment for children is a key principle of the government's Early Years Foundation Stage strategy. Each child should be nurtured in a space that offers diverse play opportunities to learn and grow. In such an environment, children can confidently lead their play and build positive relationships with staff. There should be plenty of time for physical activity, outdoor play, and engaging indoor learning. Insufficient materials or resources can hinder their progress, while a stimulating environment helps maintain their interest. Without this support, children may not reach their full potential.

Howard and McInnes emphasise the vital role of play in children's learning and development, enhancing engagement, and social interaction (Howard and McInnes, 2012). Different types of play- free, guided, and structured- each contribute to cognitive and emotional growth, with guided play balancing child-led exploration and

adult support for deeper learning. Adult involvement is crucial, as effective facilitation helps children to develop problem-solving and communication skills. Play also fosters social and emotional growth by encouraging cooperation and language use. Practitioners and caregivers who value play are more likely to integrate it into learning environments, benefitting children's overall development. Howard and McInnes (2012) introduce the concepts of 'like play' and 'not like play' to explain children's perceptions of activities. 'Like play' involves enjoyable and engaging activities, while 'not like play' refers to controlled or work-like tasks. This research shows how children perceive an activity can influence their engagement and learning experiences that feel 'like play' to maximise motivation and enjoyment. Howard and McInnes found that children perform better in activities they see as 'play-like' than in those they perceive as 'not play-like'. When activities feel playful, children are more engaged, motivated, and willing to participate, leading to better learning outcomes, increased creativity, and improved problem-solving skills. They also demonstrate more positive emotions and social interactions, fostering collaboration and communication. In contrast, activities perceived as 'not play-like' result in lower engagement and motivation, which can diminish creativity and promote a passive learning approach. The study highlights that making learning experiences feel playful can significantly enhance children's performance and development.

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