

AI Statement:

I have used AI within this assignment to support with the structure of my assignment, and I have asked AI to order the references and check the grammar.

What is Play?

Treasure (2018) advises that 'play' is a wide-ranging term for multiple activities and experiences that can be seen in children, especially those of developing ages, yet research of play and play beliefs vary significantly. The Steiner Connection (2022) says that play has always been viewed as extremely important in early childhood education and care. With young children's learning and healthy development being linked to their ability and opportunities to play and it has been well documented and researched (Treasure, T. 2018). For centuries, philosophers, theorists, psychologists and educators have been researching play and the benefits for young children. But what is play? According to Treasure (2018) there is no simple way to define play and the boundaries around play, work and learning are not always clear and can often vary according to cultural and personal beliefs. However, according to PlayEducation (1982), play is defined by those in the 'playwork' profession as a behaviour which is "freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated i.e. performed for no external goal or reward". Expanding on this, 'Freely chosen' meaning something an individual chooses for themselves in a time of leisure. It is 'personally directed' and 'intrinsically motivated' meaning the individual has the motivation (or drive) to conduct the activity based on their own interests. (Play Wales 2023).

Children learn all about risk and develop resilience skills through play. These skills are essential for building confidence and competence, necessary for growth, development, flexibility and survival. Children may experience hazardous situations whilst maturing, and it is during play that children encounter risk, learn to assess the risk and develop skills and resilience to manage it. Through practice during play they discover their limitations and realise their potential for managing challenges. Children are curious, with an innate and compelling drive to explore, experiment and test themselves. (Play Wales 2023).

Children are drawn to risk and risky activities such as reaching high levels on climbing a tree or jumping from heights, spinning and hanging upside down. It can be argued that children will develop skills based on risk that they feel supported to take safely, during play. However, it has been evidenced that opportunities for risky play are reduced and that risk averse environments are preventing children from having the opportunities to practice and develop these skills. Children are considered to seek to push boundaries around play and risk. With opportunities to try things out and explore the unfamiliar. Such play thrives in more open spaces, with space for children to explore and experiment. (Broadhead, P 2010).

Daly (2006) advocates that children's learning is encouraged and developed through play, not at the expense of play. It is noted that children of today are experiencing far less opportunities to play as their education becomes more formal and with higher expectations. It has been evidenced that there

are less opportunities for mixed aged group play, less freedom to play outside and more involvement of technology and screen-time. Settings are in a position where they are considering the balance of the diminishing play opportunities and giving more chances for children to experience play. Within the current over-organised way of life, some children so many extra-curricular activities that there are limited opportunities for play within their busy lifestyles. Although these are seen as widening their experiences, it is often at the expense of child-initiated play.

Two types of play:

Froebel (1837) founded his first kindergarten and from this came the theory that suggested children required space, light and opportunities for outdoor play as these elements are essential for learning and today. It was argued that young children learn most powerfully through direct engagement with the natural world, positioning outdoor play as a fundamental medium for holistic development. Nature was viewed as both a teacher and a context in which children could explore freely, develop autonomy, and express their natural curiosity. In *The Education of Man*, Froebel (1885) emphasises that outdoor experiences promote physical, emotional, and spiritual growth, enabling children to form meaningful connections with their environment. Froebel's kindergarten model labelled a "garden for children" embodied this philosophy by integrating outdoor access, movement, and open-ended exploration as essential elements of early education. Froebel's ideas continue to influence contemporary early years practice, underpinning approaches that value child-led discovery, sensory learning, and the developmental importance of time spent outdoors (Froebel, 1885). Play Wales (2017) echoes this theory and suggests that Natural World Play and experiencing the outdoors are essential for children to develop holistically including developing a sense of spatial awareness, teamwork and confidence. The Play Wales (2017) toolkit supports Natural World areas as important play spaces, enveloping the community and showing that these essential spaces are important for children to experience and develop not only their play skills, but also their co-ordination, teamwork and problem-solving skills. However, as funding may not always be available to fully support developing these areas, it is suggested that children can make use of resources that are sourced from the locality, such as stones, sticks, feathers and other naturally obtained items. All of which are rich in play potential, offering children the opportunity to self-direct their play and individualise the play to suit their own agenda. (Play Wales toolkit, 2017).

In early years education, play is widely recognised as being important both conceptually and pedagogically, yet its role within early years classrooms is increasingly challenged. Drawing on the sociology of childhood, research conducted in a Queensland primary setting explored how children themselves understood and participated in play. Video observations and discussions with children

revealed their interpretation of classroom tasks, prompting reconsideration of how children distinguish between 'play' and 'work'. The study's findings highlight the need to strengthen children's responsibilities within classroom practices and point to methodological issues related to children's autonomy being considered when they take part in research. (Breathnach, H. 2017). Theories linked to play have developed over the years and there are alternating emphasis depending on which viewpoint one may consider. However, there are similarities placed on why children play: play allows children to practice and explore ideas and emotions. Play can be considered therapeutic. Play encourages children to develop skills and characteristics for becoming an all-round individual as they develop. Play provides opportunities for social interaction. Play allows the release of energy. (Daly, M, Byers, E and Taylor, W 2006).

In recent years, according to the Play Wales toolkit, (2017) loose parts have become incredibly popular as a play option in childcare settings, offering the opportunity for individual play with small items developing co-ordination and fine motor skills. Loose parts can be natural or manmade items which can be manipulated and amended and offer the opportunity to build and demolish creations or develop a sense of pride when keeping these structures and adding to them at additional opportunities. However, adulteration can impact on children's self-directed play, often with the best intentions, trying to guide the play a certain way or by trying to gain valuable observation information whilst accessing the resources (Play Wales toolkit, 2017). This is validated by findings reported within Botrill's What Do I Do All Day taken from the Can I Go and Play Now (2018), where it is reported that although routines and expectations should be in place, children require further opportunities to have some freedom around play. That the timetables and confined expectations of literacy and or mathematics, the freedom of play is removed and the imagination is stifled. This brings about a sense of 'you must' rather than 'you may'. Contrasting to this however, UK Government Inspection studies recognised that disadvantaged children learnt more when surrounded by adults as they appeared hesitant to interact with those children considered more advantaged of the same age. (UK Government, Ofsted 2015).

Play Wales (2023) refers to Chugani's (1996) studies on those who had not experienced play and who were considered stimulus deprived, the studies reported "mental problems, physical desensitisation, and restrictions in brain-growth and severe learning difficulties, erratic behaviour, difficulty in forming bonds, depression and withdrawal resembling autistic children or hyperactivity and loss of control, like children with ADD. The neurological cost has been considered, and it has been reported that regions of children's brains are utterly devoid of electrical activity. The barriers behind a life without play can be attributed to physical differences, cultural beliefs with language differences, war and poverty, resulting in lack of resources and suitable play spaces for children to access (Chugani 1996).

To ensure all children reach their full holistic development, the UNCRC was established. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) highlights that:

- Every child is entitled to time and space to rest, unwind, and engage in play within a supportive environment that promotes their wellbeing.
- Children must be provided with access to play and recreational experiences, with opportunities to take part in cultural and artistic life being the responsibility of the Government.
- Adults should ensure that children are included in decisions about community activities that influence their lives.

The article is widely regarded as the key foundation for recognising play as a children's right and is frequently used to guide early years practice, playwork principles, and rights-based education. (United Nations, 1989, Article 31).

Bruce (2001), a leading expert in the UK for early childhood education, placed strong emphasis on play and its benefits for young children. It is recognised that the importance of play for developing socially with young people being prepared for society. It was argued that the children's right to play is being denied by an increasing expectation of formal education. Bruce (2001) identified 10 principles of play: Childhood being seen as valid. Holistic development being considered important. Learning is linked without being compartmentalised. Self-directed, child-initiated being considered valued. Emphasis on self-discipline. Specific periods considered as receptive to learning and development. Children and their abilities being the baseline for education. Imagination emerges when children are enjoying participation. Adult interactions with those who are considered the most supportive. Education establishes when there is interaction with the environment.

Observation

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) as documented by Wright et al. (2019) is a key component of the statutory framework used to assess and monitor the emotional and behavioural wellbeing of children and young people who are considered under the CLA / LAC (child looked after / looked after child) category. As a brief, standardised screening tool, the SDQ provides a structured method for identifying potential emotional or behavioural difficulties provides a structured method for identifying potential emotional or behavioural difficulties that may affect a child's development, relationships, or overall functioning. Its use is supportive for all children who are looked-after between the ages of 4–17, reflecting the Welsh Government (2023) and the commitment to ensure that emotional wellbeing is given equal priority alongside physical health, education, and placement

stability. The SDQ is also used to support Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMHS) referrals across England and Wales.

The SDQ is usually completed annually, enabling local authorities and professionals to build a complete and chronological understanding of each child's emotional experiences over time. This regular monitoring is particularly important for children in care, who are statistically more likely to have experienced early adversity, trauma, or disrupted attachments, all of which can contribute to complex emotional and behavioural needs (TISUK 2022). By generating scores across domains such as emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer relationships, and prosocial behaviour, the SDQ offers a nuanced picture of a child's strengths as well as areas of concern. Although it is not a diagnostic tool, it functions as an early indicator that further assessment or targeted intervention may be required. The structured nature of the SDQ also supports consistency in practice, ensuring that all children are assessed using the same evidence-based framework regardless of their placement type or local authority as advocated by Froebel (1852). This consistency and collaborative working approach amongst agencies is crucial for promoting equity in service provision and for enabling practitioners to make informed decisions about support, referrals, and care planning (Welsh Government 2025). Importantly, the SDQ facilitates a shared understanding among the professionals involved in a child's life, including social workers, carers, teachers, and health practitioners. The results can be used to inform multi-agency discussions, guide the development of individual care plans, and ensure that support is responsive to the child's evolving needs. By highlighting changes in emotional wellbeing over time, the SDQ enables early intervention, helping to prevent difficulties from escalating and contributing to more positive long-term outcomes. In this way, the SDQ plays a vital role in safeguarding the emotional health of looked-after children in Wales, ensuring that their needs are recognised, monitored, and addressed within a coherent and child-centred framework (Wright, et al. 2019).

Accuracy of Observation.

Play is recognised within Welsh early years pedagogy as a fundamental right and the primary means through which young children learn, explore, and communicate (Curriculum for Wales 2022). The Curriculum for Wales and the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) framework emphasise that play is central to children's holistic development and must underpin all assessment practices. Understanding the nature and purpose of play is therefore essential for practitioners undertaking observations and assessments, as it directly influences children's engagement and the accuracy of professional judgements. Welsh policy promotes play as a natural, intrinsically motivated activity that enables children to make sense of their world. The ECPLC framework highlights that children are "born curious about the world around them" and that play provides the conditions for exploration,

problem-solving, and creativity. Within the Curriculum for Wales (2022), play is embedded across the early years as a vehicle for developing the four purposes, supporting children to become capable learners, confident individuals, and active citizens. Play is also understood as holistic. Cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development occur simultaneously during play episodes. For example, pretend play may involve language development, emotional regulation, symbolic thinking, and social negotiation. This holistic nature makes play a rich context for observing authentic learning, as children demonstrate competencies that may not emerge in adult-directed tasks (Curriculum for Wales 2022).

Children's engagement during play is a key factor in the validity of observational assessment. Welsh assessment guidance (Welsh Government 2025) emphasises that effective assessment must be rooted in everyday interactions and meaningful contexts, with play being the most significant of these. When children are deeply engaged in self-chosen play, they display sustained attention, persistence, curiosity, and problem-solving behaviours that reflect genuine learning. Engagement is both cognitive and emotional. Children who feel secure, supported and interested are more willing to take risks, explore new ideas, and communicate their thinking. Observing children in play, therefore, provides a more accurate representation of their developmental stage than formal testing, which may limit expression or provoke anxiety. PACEY Cymru (2023) reinforces this by stating that observing children in their play is "paramount to understanding the child's needs, behaviours, preferences, well-being and interests," and that such observation can occur informally and "in the moment." Accurate assessment requires practitioners to interpret the learning embedded in play. Welsh Government guidance for 0–3 assessment emphasises the '*Notice, Analyse, Respond*' approach, which supports

practitioners in recognising significant behaviours, analysing their meaning, and responding appropriately (PACEY Cymru 2023).

Several aspects illustrate how understanding play enhances accuracy:

- Interpreting intentions: Children's play actions often reflect underlying cognitive or emotional processes. Without knowledge of play theory or schemas, practitioners may misinterpret exploratory behaviour as aimless.
- Recognising holistic learning: Welsh frameworks emphasise five developmental pathways, all of which can be observed through play. A single play episode may involve language, social interaction, emotional expression, and physical coordination.

- Avoiding adult-centred bias: The ECPLC warns against imposing adult expectations on children's play. Observations must reflect the child's perspective rather than predetermined outcomes.
- Respecting individual and cultural variation: Children express play differently depending on temperament, background, and experience. Practitioners must recognise these differences to avoid misinterpretation.
- Knowing when to intervene: Effective observation requires sensitive timing. Over-involvement can disrupt play and distort behaviours. Welsh guidance emphasises the role of the "enabling adult" who supports play without dominating it.

PACEY Cymru (2023) states that a strong theoretical understanding of play supports reflective, ethical, and child-centred assessment. Welsh Government (2022) suggests that practitioners must continually question their theories, revisit observations, and consider multiple interpretations. Documentation methods such as narrative observations, learning stories, and digital portfolios align with the Welsh emphasis on holistic, formative assessment. The approach to early years assessment stresses that assessment must inform planning that is responsive to children's interests, developmental trajectories, and well-being. Play Wales (2017) reports that when practitioners understand play deeply, they can design environments that promote engagement, interpret children's actions with nuance, and make informed professional judgements that genuinely support learning. Therefore, one may conclude that understanding play is essential for accurate and meaningful observation and assessment in early years settings. Play provides a natural, engaging context in which children demonstrate authentic learning across developmental domains. Policy frameworks emphasise that assessment must be rooted in play, grounded in their lived experiences, and informed by sensitive, reflective practice. When practitioners recognise the complexity and significance of play, they are better equipped to support children's development and uphold their rights as learners (Welsh Government 2022).

Between 2012 and 2022, Berkhout (2022) conducted research to ascertain the Hawthorne Effect (HE) within primary care. The HE is an alteration to behaviours or presentations during an observation, whilst conducting research or assessment. It is reported that the observation will alter behaviours by it taking part and that the subject being observed will change their presentations, especially when they are made aware that they are being observed. This makes observations less accurate and, in some cases, meaningless as it is difficult to ascertain the level of HE whilst the observation takes place. A case study of an unaware participant would be considered more accurate with less opportunity for the HE to be presented.

References:

Berkhout C, *et al.* (2022) *Defining and evaluating the Hawthorne effect in primary care, a systematic review and meta-analysis*. *Front. Med.* 9:1033486. doi: 10.3389/fmed.2022.1033486 <https://public-pages-files-2025.frontiersin.org/journals/medicine/articles/10.3389/fmed.2022.1033486/pdf> (Accessed 1. Mar 2026).

Bottrill, G. (2018) *Can I go and play now? Rethinking the Early Years*. London: Sage.

Breathnach, H. (2017) *Children's perspectives of play in an early childhood classroom*. Doctoral dissertation. Queensland University of Technology. Available at: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/> (Accessed: 12 February 2026).

Broadhead, P., Howard, J. and Wood, E, (2010) *Play and Learning in the Early Years*. London: Sage p. 79-84.

Chugani, H. (1996) *Neuroimaging of children deprived of sensory stimulation*, *Scientific American*, 274(4), p. 44–49.

Daly, M., Byers, E. and Taylor, W (2006) *Understanding Early Years Theory and Practice*. Professional Development. Oxford: Heinemann p. 177-181.

Department of Education and Science (DES) (1982) *Play Education*. London: HMSO.

Drummond, M.J. (1993) *Assessing Children's Learning*. London: David Fulton.

Gov.uk, Ofsted (2015) *Teaching and play in the early years – a balancing act?* Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-and-play-in-the-early-years-abalancing-act> (Accessed: 16 February 2026).

Gov.uk, Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2022) *Working definition of trauma-informed practice*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/workingdefinition-of-trauma-informed-practice> (Accessed: 25 February 2026).

McCrorie, P., Johnstone, A., Nicholls, N., Keime, M., Jidovtseff, B. & Martin, A. (2025) *Risky outdoor play in the early years: how are parental and practitioner perceptions of danger and benefits associated with young children's outdoor play experiences?* International Journal of Play, 14(2), pp. 120–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2025.2508649>

McInnes, K., Howard, J., Miles, G. and Crowley, K. (2011) *Differences in practitioners' understanding of play and how this influences pedagogy and children's perceptions of play*, Early Years, 31(2), p. 121–133.

PACEY Cymru (2023) *Play in Wales: Guidance for Early Years Practitioners*. Cardiff: PACEY Cymru.

Pickering, D. (2017) *Creating accessible play spaces: A toolkit*. Available at: <https://www.playwales.org.uk> (Accessed: 10 February 2026).

Play Wales (2017) *Play Wales Toolkit: Natural Play*. Cardiff: Play Wales.

Play Wales (2022) *Current play policy in Wales*. Available at: <https://www.playwales.org.uk> (Accessed: 12 February 2026).

Play Wales (2023) *The Importance of Play*. Cardiff: Play Wales.

Steiner Connection (2022) *The Role of Play in Steiner Early Education*. Available at: <https://www.steinerconnection.org.uk> (Accessed: 12 February 2026).

Teichert, L. and Helbig, S. (2023) *Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852)*, in Geier, B.A. (ed.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Educational Thinkers*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3030-81037-5_42-1 (Accessed: 18 February 2026).

TISUK (2022) *Trauma-Informed Schools UK: Guidance for Practitioners*. Available at: <https://www.tisuk.org> (Accessed: 20 February 2026).

Treasure, T. (2018) *What is play, in Learning through play: Creating a play-based approach within early childhood contexts*, p. 3–21.

United Nations (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. New York: United Nations.

Welsh Government (2022) *Curriculum for Wales: Early Years Guidance*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Welsh Government (2022) *Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) Framework*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Welsh Government (2023) *Assessment Arrangements for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales> (Accessed: 28 February 2026).

Welsh Government (2023) *Assessment for 0–3-year-olds: Notice, Analyse, Respond*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Welsh Government (2024) *Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care Plan in Wales (Detailed version)*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales> (Accessed: 15 February 2026).

Welsh Government (2025) *Written Statement: Multi-Agency Practice Framework for Children's Services*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales> (Accessed: 12 February 2026).

Wright, H. *et al.* (2019) *Use of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire to identify treatment needs in looked-after children referred to CAMHS, Developmental Child Welfare*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2516103218817555> (Accessed: 12 February 2026).