

AI Cover Sheet

1. I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

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Children's play theory and practice

Section 1

Play is a complex and dynamic activity that provides engagement, creativity and imagination. It includes children's self-selected, self-guided, and naturally motivated behaviour. It is done with no purpose or reward but is a fundamental part of healthy development, not just for individuals but also for the society in which they live.

Waters (2022) illustrates that play is defined in Article 31 of the UNRC (the UN convention of the rights of the child) children's play is any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves. It takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise.

Eberle (2014, quoted in Waters, 2022, p. 4) states that play is comprised of six common components, anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength and poise, However Bottrill (2018 quoted in Waters, 2022, p. 4) discusses what play is and should be rather than providing common elements. Stating that play should be unstructured with countless interpretations and boundless possibilities.

One type of play considered to be an important part of a child's development is role play. Effective role play provides children with the opportunity to imitate people who are familiar to them as well as people who are in occupations such as police, fire, doctor, nurse. Role play is extremely important in helping support a child's holistic development. It stimulates

a child's imagination and encourages social development by focusing on various areas of growth speech, language, personal, emotional and physical (Waters, 2022). It is essential that the environment that the child plays in is rich in opportunities, providing an ample amount of space for the role play area. Whilst also providing props and materials that represent that area. If the area is familiar to them like a home area it provides a safe and secure environment for that child and enables them to fully engage in play (Hawkins, 2024). In approaching this one might refer to the developmental pathways of play by age two to three years old a child is learning to develop their attention to play. By noticing things within their environment and acting out familiar routines. They begin to imitate familiar roles and scenarios within their play. This is why role play becomes one essential part of play (Welsh Gov, UK).

Secondly another important type of play considered essential for a child's development is explanatory play. This type of play promotes a child's natural curiosity and encourages them to investigate and explore; it also uses a child's senses, touch, taste and smell. Lynch (2022) states that early year's practitioners must recognise that exploratory play is all about the process rather than the final product. An environment that encourages trial and error, inquiry, and curiosity is conducive to exploration. By providing updated sensory learning tools, it promotes individual play for the child.

To illustrate this point, one might refer to Mildred Parten and the six stages of play that children go through from birth to five years. Although her theory is extremely old (1930s) it is still an integral part of a child's development. The six stages are unoccupied play, solitary play, onlooker play, parallel play, associative play and cooperative play. Both role play and explanatory play are incorporated through the stages (Hywood, 2022).

When children are acting out a role play scenario, they are using cooperative play. This is when children can communicate and collaborate with each other to reach a common goal. Exploratory play can start from an early age using sensory toys that enable a child to use all their senses to investigate and explore their toys and surroundings. An example of this

is a baby splashing their hands and feet in the bath. This is when an unoccupied play is an integral part of the first stages of play. Early years practitioners can use the stages of play to observe the development of a child.

An equally important aspect to consider is how this play is enabled, fostering child centered learning environments is something that both Montessori and Bruner support however Montessori lays more emphasis on self-directed play where the child chooses what to play with and what outcomes that will be. While Bruner acknowledges the role of adult lead guiding. This is when resources are set out beforehand for the children to engage in (Hywood, 2022).

According to Bottrill (2018) children need the time and space to be able to explore and delve deep into play in which they are so absorbed and focused within their individual learning. Dewey (quoted in Care learning, 2025,) believes that play is linked to education and helps children make strong connections with the environment and world around them.

Section 2

According to Waters (2022) self-directed play is when children choose what they want to do, this includes when to stop and try something else. For example, the Welsh Government (n.d) states that creating an environment where children can freely play is fundamental and an integral part of a child's healthy independence and development. Children who are engaged in free play when they are actively engrossed in an activity but then spontaneously go and play with something else are acting out of their own curiosity and having their own interests in what they feel is fun and engaging. This type of play is beneficial for children as it promotes and encourages a child's imagination and creativity. To illustrate this point further The Steiner Connection, (2022) says that self-directed play

is an essential part of a child's development as it allows the child to have full control of their learning, this provides more independence and creativity allowing the child to express themselves more freely.

The role of an adult during self-directed play is vital Andrews, (2017) believe that adults should encourage and promote play, while extending the learning by giving the children opportunities to explore their surroundings, while observing and scaffolding. According to Play Wales, (2021, quoted in Waters, 2022. P. 7) The principles of play work are to allow children to expand and develop their own play; adults should have an active role in enhancing the play setting to keep the children fully engaged. Having a positive learning environment and one where all the children's needs are met is when children are more relaxed and fulfilled and will enjoy their provision more. Having self-directed play is a natural pathway to supporting holistic development in children (The Steiner Connection, 2022). However, it must be noted that the role of the adult is to observe and intervene to resolve conflict, if necessary, along with making sure that the environment is safe at all times.

This is why the Play cycle provides a practical model and framework to enable adults within early years settings to gain an insight into the definition of play and its complexities. Sturrock and Else (1998 cited in King and Sturrock, 2019, p 15) describes the process of play (play cycle) broken down into six components metaludes, play cue, play return, play frame, loop and flow and annihilation.

Having a practical model to observe children through play encourages the adult to recognise the cues and not manipulate the play causing a formal practice rather than playful. In a four-stage pre-test, practice, post-test, delayed post-test procedure observed by and collected by McInnes *et al* (2009) it was demonstrated that children practicing the same problem-solving task under playful rather than formal practice conditions had

performed significantly better in terms of the time taken to complete the task and the accuracy compared to the formal practice. In addition, it was noted that the behaviour of the children was exceptional as they were more focused on the task as they seen it as play rather than learning. The above test also indicated that having the presence of an adult was a decisive factor in inhibiting learning. The role of the adult within an early year setting is to focus on supporting the child through play and understanding play through a child perceptive. In doing so they can allow children to have a choice and control over their own experiences. However, it is not just observation and standing back that are essential cues. Having the correct language within a setting is important. Adults asking open questions within their setting, for example what would you like to choose? How did you do that? These types of questions will encourage the child to reflect more deeply on the activity.

Having the freedom to engage in free play is a rewarding experience, it enables a child to make their own choices. Having the ability to make a choice is vital to children's cognitive development as well as their mental health and well-being. According to O'Connor (2017 cited in Waters, 2022, p. 26) self-directed play gives children the freedom to follow their interest and explore their own ideas.

To illustrate this point, one might refer to The Montessori school of Burkshires, (2024) which describes the benefits of self-directed play as building self-confidence, encouraging independence and stimulating imagination. An equally important aspect is making sure that adulteration is not present. This is when an adult wants to join in or wanting to rescue the play by interfering and taking control of the play (Sands, 2013).

Every child is unique and has a different way of expressing them self that is why self-directed play is essential within any setting at home or in an early year's setting (UNICEF, 2022).

Section 3

Observation within an early year's setting is defined as a method used by practitioners to gain a greater understanding of a child's needs. It allows practitioners to tailor educational learning, identify strengths and areas where improvement is needed. Practitioners can monitor the development of the child, reflect on what interests the child has and what they dislike and evaluate how best to support the child's needs. Welsh Government, (2024) states that observing play directly supports learning across different areas.

Observation is a method of capturing the facts demonstrated by a child through their actions. Care Learning (2025) states that observation is not just used for educational learning but also noticing potential concerns for example a delay in speech may indicate a need for additional intervention with a speech therapist.

There are many methods that are used to observe children within an early year setting, from narrative observations when detailed written accounts of what is happening during the play are taken (Connect Childcare, 2024). Along with learning stories which are observations over a longer period. They are determined by the child's interest, participation in an activity along with communication and perseverance. To illustrate this point, one might refer to Te Whariki which is the national childhood curriculum in New Zealand. According to Veazey (2020) learning stories fit into the curriculum because they highlight a child's development in a holistic way. It is all about what and how they learned it. By focusing on a child's strengths and interests, learning stories empower a child's learning journey.

Another method of observation is time trackers. This is carried out at regular intervals (15 minutes apart) one example of this is when a child is interacting with other children while they are playing (Teach early years, 2025).

One observation method that tracks a child's emotional wellbeing and involvement is the Leuven scale. This scale is a 5-point rated system consisting of two parts, a wellbeing scale and the involvement scale. The scale prioritizes the child's emotional health and

places the child's wellbeing at the forefront. According to Learning Journals (2021) the Leuven scale measures a child's engagement in a particular task. When a child is happy, they are more engaged in their learning and more focused on the activity at hand. By focusing on the individual child this method is beneficial to use as a tool for gauging how well a child is developing. In addition to this it also provides a practical means of evaluating the quality of an early years setting. The rationale behind this method is that when a child is reaching the top of the scale (extremely high) it leads to high levels of child development along with what Leuven's (2015) calls a deeper understanding of learning. The evaluation process is straight forward by observing the children for a short space of time then rating from 1-5 on the scale. However, Lewis (2011) states that not all children are scoring 4-5 at all times. A child's involvement can fluctuate many times throughout the day. For example, if a child is feeling tired their involvement will be less engaging in an activity. We can argue further by stating that cultural differences can play an important part, and the need to be sensitive in applying this method for different cultural settings needs to be reflected by making sure adaptations are made where necessary. Furthermore, according to Brodie (2025) both Montessori and Laevers methods share some comparisons, both methods emphasize the importance of having a prepared environment in helping facilitate the children's learning. Along with valuing the importance of self-directed play within both home and educational settings. All of this points to the conclusion that the Leuven scale highlights the importance of emotional wellbeing and deep engagement in holistic development. As the method is based on observations this makes it non-intrusive, and emphasis is placed on each child having individual needs which educators can then tailor to maintain an inclusive learning environment. However, although the scale does support holistic development it must be noted that educators must be observant for any signs of childhood trauma as this could impact a child's ability to engage in the learning process.

Furthermore, Brodie (2025) points out that the Leuven scale has provided educators with a framework for developing a learning environment that is intellectually engaging, emotionally encouraging and self-motivating. The Leuven scale, which is designed to be

used with children, plays an important role especially when reports have highlighted concerns regarding children's emotional well-being. United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) reported that high levels of unhappiness among children in the UK compared to the USA. Green *et al* (2005, cited by Howard and McInnes, 2012, p. 39) point out that 10% of children between the ages of 5-16 years old have been identified with mental health disorders in the UK alone. That is why having an observational method that focuses on the health and well-being of children is essential.

Section 4

When observing and assessing a child it is important that the environment is supportive and challenging. Caregivers can gain an insight into a child's growth and depth of learning by closely observing them through play. Besio *et al* (2018) states that when we observe children it is important that observations are conducted during play in a setting that is naturalistic focusing on child lead play as opposed to it being adult lead. Play is powerful, play is natural and a process not a product, it allows a child to be their true self. Play deepens children's learning and understanding. It enables them to have first-hand experiences based on what they already know and can do (Moyle, 2009). Observing children through play provides a more accurate reflection of the child's development. By observing free play, it allows practitioners to see how children interact naturally. It provides a clear understanding of a child's personality along with their likes and dislikes enabling practitioners to gain the necessary information to adapt their resources and provision accordingly. By observing a child, it allows practitioners to support the needs of the child in a non-intrusive way. By giving children, the opportunity to play encourages exploration across a variety of play types (Care Learning, 2025).

Lieberman (1977, quoted in Howard and McInnes, 2012) states that although play is a behaviour that can be seen what separates it from other types of behaviour is that the

activity is understood to be play by the player themselves. That is why it is important that children are given choices without adult presence, so they perceive an activity as play.

To illustrate this point further one might refer to a study carried out where play or non-play conditions were applied to 129 children from 3 educational settings. Howard and McInnes (2012) state that the conditions of the study remained the same activity apart from one was set up as not play (where the adult is directly present, and the child was asked to participate in the task sitting at a table) and another like play (where the adult is proximal but the activity occurred on the floor with the child having choices about if they wanted to participate) the findings concluded that children who engaged in the like play where they had a choice and it was not adult lead smiled more during the activity appeared more engaged during the overall session and were more motivated, compared to the children that completed the not play session.

In conclusion, despite having the same activity but a different approach to the task demonstrated an increase in emotional well-being during the session. This suggests the importance of a child perceiving an activity as play, as this leads to children taking control of their own actions and determining the outcomes. This increases a child's independence and self-esteem and promotes a holistic approach to learning. Fattore *et al*, (2007 cited by Howard and McInnes, 2012) point out that children report that play contributes to their happiness and well-being.

Finally, by maintaining continuous training and professional development, we will ensure a shared consensus about what play is and what it means for children. Having a deep understanding of play with regards to the play cycle and observational methods used during play will enable early years practitioners to provide a purposeful provision in facilitating a child's holistic development. As the UNCRC (1989) Article 31 brought attention to the right to play for all children it is important that we ensure that all children benefit from this participation and that learning through play remains embedded within

education. It must also be noted that the importance of play should not just remain within an educational provision. If both parents and caregivers understand the importance of play from an early year perspective this can increase a child's developmental progress.

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