

Section 1

It is considered that play is an enjoyable action (Collins Dictionary, n.d.) and that play is beneficial to all children, as it is a natural way to learn and develop (Loizou, 2017) it is where children can lead their own play being creative, experience risk and have opportunities for collaboration (Bottrill, 2018, p. 26). Additionally, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, n.d.) state “children have the right to play.” As a result, The Children’s Commissioner for Wales (Holland, 2018, p.4), defines play as essential for children, enabling independence by following their own ideas and interests for their own self purpose. Furthermore, creating the enthusiasm, and motivation for learning and exploration, indoors or outside (Dewey, 1933, cited in McInnes *et al.* 2013; Bruce, 2011).

Along with England and Scotland, Wales aim to raise the importance of play, wellbeing, the holistic development, and countless opportunities for growth, learning, using the contemporary thinking of playworker Bob Hughes (1996). He identified several different types of play that children can embrace themselves in (cited in Play Scotland, n.d.), by creating environments supporting all types of play, this will the empower development, within physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional skills (Canning and Rekers, 2022).

An important aspect of play according to Stevens and Price (2000, p.7 cited in Hughes, 2012), who claim ‘mastery play’ supports good mental health, being outdoors in the natural world, learning the cause and effect. Furthermore, enabling childing to explore, experiment, and enjoy play with a sense of risk taking, the opportunities for revisiting the experience in their natural environment. For example, creating dens with natural findings by trying and experimenting. (Hughes, 2012; Rees-Edwards, 2022) this fosters children’s self-esteem, confidence, and long-life love of exploration (learning).

As equally important to consider, deep play (risky play), Hughes (2012, p. 112) argues it is “vitally important”, allowing children to develop their sense of self and to learn to risk assess. Additionally, supporting the development of taking risk, survival skills and challenge also helping to conquer fears (Greenway and Hutchings, 2022; Play Scotland,

n.d.). For example, play could include, climbing trees, rough play, creating dens, playing in the dark, etc.

Catron and Allen, (2007 cited in Biddle *et al.* 2012) argue play is practical, authentic, with children learning about the world around them using their senses and enabling them to express themselves. Furthermore, both types of play support the children's development, physically, via gross and fine motor skills, holistically, and supporting their emotional development, allowing children to express and understand their emotions and supporting the development of self-regulation (Howard and McInnes, 2012; Colliver *et al.* 2022) Moreover, Freud (1946, cited in Biddle *et al.* 2012) believes play provides a therapeutic effect.

Play develops cognitive skills with children using their knowledge through, 'schemas' or 'fascinations' (Piaget, 1962, cited in Biddle *et al.* 2012; WG, 2020). Through play, behaviours are repeated to allow the child to develop and refine their learning and knowledge (Doherty and Hughes, 2014, p. 253). For example, trajectory schema, where children show an interest in throwing objects, to climb and jumping in puddles. Orientation schema, where children enjoy seeing things from different angles, for example, hanging upside down. Enveloping, putting themselves inside boxes. Rotation, spinning themselves, rolling down hills, or using screwdrivers, nuts, and bolts (Canning and Rekers, 2022; PACEY, 2016).

Finally, play according to Bruner (1972, cited in Brown, 2014, p. 30) "is one of the most important aspects of social development...providing knowledge, information and processing skills". Parten (1929) identifies social development through different stages of play, where children interact with others. To begin, play is solitary, building cognitive and mastering motor skills, supporting self-regulation (Colliver *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, supporting the child's independence (Barker *et al.*, 2014, cited in Colliver *et al.*, 2021). Next, onlooker play where children observe others, recognising different relationships, and developing through parallel play, playing close to others, but independently and copying others (Parten, 1929, cited in Waters-Davies, 2022, p. 27). Moreover, children will learn to develop crucial social skills, such as, empathy, sympathy, and the ability to attune to others, (Brown, 2014, p. 30). During different experiences of play, children will

learn how to take turns, share, negotiate and to develop empathy whilst learning about themselves (Vygotsky. 1978, cited in Gordon Biddle *et al*). Language will also develop whilst socialising with others, especially specialised language (Tinney. 2022), for example during mastery play, creating a den.

The Welsh Government (2014) states play as “fundamental...for healthy development” both mastery and deep play, provide children great holistic developmental experiences, by taking calculated risks, challenging themselves and experimenting (trying) they are developing resilience, independence, and confidence, additionally enhancing their physical development, cognitive development and improving risk assessment skills (Rees-Edwards, 2022; WG, 2020, p.9; Bottrill, 2018; Birth to 5 Matters, n.d.).

Additionally, Play Wales (n.d.) argues “children are born with a desire to seek out opportunities to take risks,” and children should be provided with these opportunities which contribute to their overall wellbeing. Despite the benefits, McDowall-Clark (2020, p.144) claims children are experiencing less free play at home and outdoors from an unclear awareness of danger and over scheduling and referring to children as “bubble wrap kids”. Hughes (2012) and Rees-Edwards (2022) share their concerns over adults limiting risky play opportunities, due to regulations and restrictions within settings, Hughes (2012) believes deep play is being restricted due to the culture of pursuing legal action in case of injury. Of course, adults have the duty to ensure children’s safety, protecting them from serious harm, adults, therefore must risk assess, ensuring the balance is on the benefits of challenging play and risk (Play Wales, n.d; Froebel, 1967, cited in Maynard, 2014).

Section 2

It is a well-known fact, children have a “strong intrinsic need to play” (WG, 2022, p. 15). Self-directed play indoors or out should be fun and enjoyable, encouraging holistic development by building on their emotional, social, cognitive, and physical development (The LEGO Foundation, n.d.). Additionally, building on schemas reinforcing knowledge and understanding about the world, by imitating, testing, and trying through watching others (MacDonald, 2022).

During self-directed play (also known as unstructured), there should not be any adult involvement and no end-result (WG, 2014, p. 14). According to Catron and Allen, (2007, cited in Biddle *et al.* 2012) play is practical and authentic enabling children to explore the world around them with their senses and enabling children to express themselves. Furthermore, Brown (2014) suggests self-directed play supports a more holistic approach by developing “creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, as well as physical, social, cognitive and emotional strength and skills”. Whereas, directed play (structured or guided play) is led and organised by adults, with rules, and having specific learning objectives (end results), with adults overseeing, giving instructions, closed questioning, guiding, and providing feedback (Learning through landscapes, 2013). However, according to McDowall-Clark (2020), and McInnes (2011), play is being restricted due to a lack of awareness or knowledge to ensure adults can support self-directed play and holistic development, and not entirely focusing on literacy and numeracy as the end-result. To put it simply, both directed and self-directed play have their purpose, directed play is valuable for adults in supporting children within their development, while self-directed play nurtures independence, freedom, creativity, and a sense of self (MacDonald, 2022). Furthermore, the adult’s role, is to maximise playfulness and enable learning (McInnes *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, McInnes *et al.* (2013) suggests adults should provide opportunities where children perceive the activity as play and emphasises the adult is to support the play and not over direct, or take over, as in the following examples:

A treasure basket, of natural household objects for children around 5-10 months provides curiosity and exploration through their senses. The role of the adult is to provide a safe environment and be responsive to the solitary play and not directive. (Hughes, n.d.).

Loose parts, provides children with awe and wonder, allowing children to “enter the land of ‘what if,’ that promotes the type of thinking that leads to problem solving and theoretical reasoning” through creativity (Daly and Beloglovsky, 2015, p. 10).

Being outdoors, enables children to move freely, play in a larger scale and experience first-hand the world around them, as well as problem solving, gross and fine motor, social and emotional skills (Tinney, 2022; Boulton and Thomas, 2023). Tinney (2022) identifies early years international approaches for example, Te Whāriki approach in New Zealand, Reggio Emilia in Italy, Furthermore, in the UK, the forest school approach was introduced, based on Skogsmulle Foundation in Sweden, which focus on promoting cross-curricular learning in the outdoors. Forest School is to provide risky play opportunities and encourage the natural connection to nature, promoting holistically development (Knight, 2024). The WG (2020) recommends outdoor play, stating that by providing “the freedom of the outdoors lowers inhibitions and allows children to express themselves”.

Vygotsky (cited in Gray and MacBlain, 2015, p. 103), believed children create their own ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ (ZPD) during play, by enabling children to choose their own interests to explore, additionally, Jones and Reynolds (2011, cited in Loizou, 2017), suggest the role of an adult during self-directed play is to be an observer, facilitator, and a participant, depending on the individual child adult involvement may differ.

Some children will be at their optimal level not requiring support or guidance. Whereas other children may depend on an adult to ‘scaffold’/guide, through observations and knowledge of the child, acknowledging the cues of body language, eye contact or directly invited into the play is an opportunity for the adult to support.

Furthermore, the role of an adult during self-directed play is to enhance the environment, and enable children to develop their own play, through the 'play cycle' (MacDonald, 2022). According to King and Newstead (2020), there are six components to the play cycle, with the role of the adult, enriching the play experience. MacDonald (2020) and Rekers and McCree (2020) identifies that the adults are not to take over the play, but to remove barriers, as the play is controlled by the child and allowing adults to observe. King (2020) agrees that play cycle is a form of observing child's play and that the adult understanding the play cycles, will improve professional practice. Beginning with Meta-lude, starting off as an idea, where children start to play. Moving on to play cue where the child would show physically or verbally the invitation to play. Then on to play return is the response from the other person. Then loop and flow, this is where children process the cue and return. Moving to play frame, this is the boundary that the play is within. Finally, annihilation where the play ends naturally or by interruption by an adult.

Section 3

Let's begin by considering the definition of observations, according to Oxford Dictionary it is "an act of watching somebody carefully for a period of time, especially to learn something" (2024), to extend this definition, observations are more than watching, and more than what the adult thinks, it is a process of identifying interests, what engages and motivates them, where the child is developmentally and how to support or provide guidance they might need (WG, 2020; Louis, 2022). Furthermore, through observations adults can become aware of children's emotional state and their friendships.

Additionally, Tovey (2017, cited in Louis, 2022) state an "Observation is more than watching, it means listening carefully, being open and wanting to know more."

Sharman, Cross, and Vennis (2015) argue that all observations should have a reason, then compared to developmental knowledge but keeping in mind, children develop differently, claiming observations should have an aim, objectives, reflection (to ensure that the objective has been met) and finally a conclusion (matching it to the aim).

Overall ensuring that the practitioner has information and knowledge of child development to guide their recommendations for the unique child's learning experiences.

It cannot be denied that observations are important through self-directed play in the early years. Thus, it presents adults with key aspects of the child's interests and how to support them and their learning (Bruce, Louis, and McCall, 2015; Louis, 2022; The Lego Foundation. n.d., p. 23). However, there are many different types of observational strategies, for example, time sampling is taken every hour capturing a snapshot; Checklists are specific, yet restrictive and miss additional information (Irwin and Bushnell, 1980, cited in Bruce, Louis and McCall, 2015). Additionally, Brodie (2017) identifies additional observation methods, such as "Narrative observation", a detailed written account, created over a longer period. "Tracking" shows interest in setting areas. "Sociogram" focusing on social groups, how and who they play with and finally "magic moments" quick snapshots are written on 'post it' notes; for example, in transition, leaving the main carer to a key worker, observations take place, the adult can act on

what they have seen or heard and write it up on the spot enabling reflection (Bruce, Louis and McCall, 2015).

The Welsh Government (2020) notably have an emphasis on wellbeing, prioritising it as one of the five developmental pathways, emphasising the positive impact practitioners have on children's wellbeing. One must admit, wellbeing is not easy to measure, as it relates to an individual's internal state especially within the early years, where the young children have not yet developed their emotional or language skills to express themselves (Greenway and Hutchings, 2020). The Leuven Scale of emotional wellbeing and involvement is a five-point observational tool, created by Ferre Leavers (1994). Using the scale from 1 to 5, 5 being the most involved and 1 the least.

Children who show high involvement or engagement within play or an activity indicate high levels of well-being, "which is linked to self-esteem, self-confidence, resilience, spontaneity and freedom" (Greenway and Hutchings, 2020). Similarly, MacRae and Jones (2020), highlight during self-directed play, adults are to observe if children are at ease (safe) within the setting or environment, and the child is showing interest and focus, which provides the adults with further knowledge of the child and their behaviours. Furthermore, when the scale indicates increasing involvement where the child is more focused, and motivated, this is possible when a child feels a match between the choice of the activity when it is exactly right, not too difficult, or too easy, the scale indicates a positive wellbeing, therefore enhancing the child's personal, social, and emotional development (Early Excellence Ltd., 2022). Consequently, children who score lower on the scale for involvement and wellbeing shows the child is not benefiting from the learning experience, therefore affecting their wellbeing and adults are more likely to interact or guide the play (Greenway and Hutchings, 2022; MacRae and Jones, 2020).

Although the Leuven Scale does not specifically show and identify individual areas of development, it identifies whether the child is engaged in activities and self-directed play, therefore showing a higher level of wellbeing, will have a positive impact on holistic development as the child had the involvement. Additionally, Allingham (2017, cited Brodie, 2018, p. 156) suggests the Leuven Scale should be completed first, as the

involvement within activities, play rest on the wellbeing of the child. Moreover, after observations have taken place, practitioners need to assess and reflect on their new learning of the child, enabling to child to progress and learn through enriching play experiences. (Bruce, Louis, MacCall, 2015).

Section 4

It is a well-known fact, that children develop in different ways and rates, with the addition of life experiences that shape children into the u that children develop in different ways and rates, with life experiences shaping them into the unique individuals they are (Birth to 5 Matters, n.d.). According to Aubrey and Riley (2016), for children to feel safe and secure, adults need to develop positive attachments and get to know and understand them, this enables the child to feel safe and they belong. Garvey, and Zeedyk (2017, p. 199) argues “observations can help adults to work out what to do next, in order to support children to grow, develop, flourish and thrive” In other words, through observations adults are to use their knowledge and reflect, by planning experiences that are meaningful and relevant to the child’s interests, play is the vehicle to enabling authentic learning and developing holistically (Bruce, Louis and McCall, 2015; WG, 2020, p. 7).

Furthermore Harvard (n.d.) identifies that children’s brains need to be stimulated by interaction with adults, additionally with the basic needs to feel safe and secure, following Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943) which identify to achieve self-esteem and self-actualisation humans need food, warmth, shelter, sleep, routine, to feel safe...and secure, love and belonging (Garvey and Zeedyk, 2018).

Firstly, through play and observations, practitioners can get to know the individual, for example, when a child does not feel safe, they may show behaviours that are caused by the reptilian brain; fight, flight, or freeze, therefore from observations adults can assess the situation and provide the child with safety (Garvey and Zeedyk. 2018).

Additionally, the emotional (limbic) brain is the area identified by Garvey and Zeedyk (2018, p. 43) “emotions, memories, self-esteem, and a sense of identity” are developed.

Through observations, adults can become a co-regulator (Birth to 5 Matters, n.d.). Harvard (n.d.), agrees and identifies the importance of “playful interactions with adults help develop sturdy brain architecture, the foundations of lifelong health, and the building blocks of resilience.” Additionally, Peter Gray (n.d., cited in Mehta, Henriksen, and Mishra, 2020) argues that children learn through curiosity, playfulness and socially through play. Similarly, Howard and McInnes (2012) emphasizes the role plays as it enhances the emotional well-being of children, and they identify that play or even an adult-directed activity, which is perceived as play has a positive effect on the child’s wellbeing and emotional development, whereas, an activity that does not seem like play, children’s well-being is lower. Therefore, identifying that play provides more of an authentic and genuine observation as the child is in a happier emotional state. Moreover, Allingham (2017, cited in Brodie, 2018) identifies the importance of wellbeing observations, showing whether a child is happy and secure, or if they show they are anxious and feel unsafe, it is highly unlikely the child will engage in play.

Play has many roles and benefits for children, as it is a well-known fact play supports holistic development and children bring their knowledge and build on it (Canning and Rekers, 2020, p. 56). Thompson, Bulloss and Vessey, (2018, cited in Canning and Rekers, 2020) agree and state that within every play experience a child encounter, they have an opportunity to learn. For example, babies are born with curiosity and wanting to explore, stretching their arms out and exploring the world with their senses, it is self-directed and self-chosen, therefore play is how children learn to direct their own learning and how to make friends and overcome challenges, fears, problem solve, and they have the freedom to make choices (Peter Gray, 2021).

All these points concur that play is to be authentic and real to the child, demonstrating an accurate reflection of what they know, allowing adults to learn more about the child, personally, developmentally and with their interests, enabling the adult to further extend children’s opportunities and experiences by providing space, time, or open-ended resources (Tinney, 2020).

Rekers and McCree (2020), identify that to support children's development adults need to provide times during play where they observe and assess and join in without interfering. The Welsh Government (2020) agree and identify that observations should be carried out to enable assessments, labelling it a 'fundamental' process allowing each child to progress at their own pace and highlighting that there should not be tick lists that record something that happened once, assessments should be useful, manageable, and contain purposeful information about the child, which enables subsequent planning. Additionally, Jennings (2020) argues that planning requires lots of careful consideration.

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