

Cover Sheet

For this assignment I have submitted the following:

A portfolio which consists of 4 different sections totalling 3000 words

AI statement

I acknowledge the use of Chat GTP March 2026 to Harvard Reference my references

I used the prompt(s): Please Harvard Reference

Part 1

Play is an essential part of early childhood and is central for supporting children's holistic development, referring to the growth of the whole child, including their physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language skills. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises the importance of holistic development and play in early childhood. Article 31 recognises children's right to rest, leisure, and play, showing that play is essential for physical, social, emotional, and cognitive growth. Article 29 highlights that education should develop children's personality, talents, and abilities to their fullest potential. Together, these articles underline that early years practitioners must provide diverse play opportunities to support the whole child and uphold their rights. (Unicef, 2024).

It is important for a child to experience a variety of play types because each type supports different aspects of development and allows children to explore, learn, and express themselves in meaningful ways. Vygotsky (1967) argues that play is a key part of children's development, not just a pastime. It lets children safely explore impulses, practise self control, problem-solving, and social skills, and act out roles in imaginary situations. Through play, they develop cognitively, emotionally, and socially, using creative thinking to understand rules and relationships, whilst interacting with peers and adults within their zone of proximal development.

Two significant types of play are physical play and imaginative or role play. Both contribute to holistic development but in different ways.

These types of play support holistic development, but they do so in different ways. Physical play involves active movement and requires children to use different muscle groups across the body. Examples include running, climbing, jumping, balancing, throwing, kicking, riding bikes or scooters, dancing, completing obstacle courses, and playing ball games. These activities help children develop coordination, improve motor skills, and build physical confidence, whilst promoting overall strength, balance, and body awareness. It can also support children's overall health and wellbeing by encouraging regular movement, improving fitness, strengthening muscles and bones. Socially, it will often involve team games and activities which will develop skills such as cooperation, turn taking, teamwork and communication. Emotionally, it builds self-confidence, resilience and a sense of achievement as

children learn new skills, face challenges, and manage risk safely. Ginsburg et al., 2007 believes engaging in play is vital for children and adolescents, as it promotes their mental, physical, social, and emotional growth.

Play is often divided into a number of different stages and sociologist and researcher Midred Parten who is seen as one of the earliest researchers of play has developed a theory on play which then allowed her to come up with 6 stages (MacDonald, 2022) and physical play can be closely linked to these different stages of play.

Physical play develops gradually as children grow and become more socially aware. At first, they simply explore movement during unoccupied play, crawling, balancing, and handling toys as they discover what their bodies can do. This leads into solitary play, which can seem a little worrying as the child is not interacting with others, but during this time the child is embedding skills such as cognitive and motor skills independently. As their interests increase, they begin watching and learning through spectator play, picking up new movements, and understanding the social rules of games. As the children grow and develop, they will start playing alongside others in parallel play, often copying what they see whilst still focusing on their own activity. Over time, this becomes more interactive through associative play, with children sharing equipment and engaging more directly with one another communicating and imitating each other's movements. Finally, physical play becomes fully collaborative in cooperative play, where children take part in group games, take turns, follow rules, and work together towards shared goals. Throughout this journey, physical play strengthens not only motor development but also confidence, social skills, and problem-solving abilities.

Imaginative or role play supports holistic development by allowing children to express feelings, explore different roles, and develop communication skills. It encourages creativity, problem-solving, and independent thinking. It plays an important role in social, emotional, cognitive, and language development. Through role play, children learn about relationships, routines, and social expectations. Emotionally, it helps children process experiences and develop empathy, as they take on different perspectives. Children often begin with solitary pretend play, then move to parallel play alongside others. As they develop, their play becomes more interactive, progressing to associative and cooperative play where they share roles and create stories together.

Imaginative play can be encouraged by providing open ended materials such as dressing up clothes, role play spaces, play kitchens, dolls, construction materials, and toys. Practitioners should support through careful interaction. Instead of directing the play, they should watch and build on children's ideas. They can support learning by asking open-ended questions, teaching new words, and providing extra materials to make play more engaging. By offering a balance of physical and imaginative play opportunities, practitioners can support children's holistic development across all areas of learning.

Developmental theorists highlight its importance; play allows children to follow rules and behave in ways that they may not yet manage in everyday life. During play, children often act beyond their usual level of development and demonstrate skills that are more advanced than their typical behaviour. In this way, play supports learning and growth, as it brings together many aspects of development and becomes an important source of children's progress (Vygotsky, 1978).

Part 2

Self-directed play, also called child led or free play, is when children choose their own activities, choosing what to do, how to do it, and for how long. Unlike structured or adult-led tasks, self-directed play is guided by the child's interests, curiosity, and motivations. This type of play is vital for children's development because it promotes independence, problem solving, creativity, and social skills. As Play Wales explains, "Play encompasses children's behaviour which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated" (Play Wales, n.d.), highlighting that self-directed play is led by the child rather than imposed by adults. This type of play is essential for holistic development, supporting physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and communication skills simultaneously. When children choose their own play, they are more engaged, motivated, and able to embed learning naturally in meaningful experiences. While the play is child led, the adult's role is still crucial as they create a safe and stimulating environment, provide resources, and support learning without controlling the play. Self-directed play empowers children to learn at their own pace, strengthens creativity, and enhances confidence. These experiences demonstrate how play can simultaneously support multiple areas of holistic development.

Adults play a key role in supporting self-directed play, but their involvement should be supportive rather than controlling. Greg Bottrill (2018) explains that adults should watch children's play, interact when appropriate, and join in as supportive play partners within the environment. Adults are responsible for creating a safe, stimulating environment, and providing a variety of resources such as blocks, loose parts, art materials, outdoor equipment, and sensory items. These resources allow children to explore, experiment and use their imagination while developing their own ideas through play. Adults support learning through scaffolding, where they provide guidance and encouragement without taking over the activity. For example, if a child is building a complex block tower, an adult might ask questions such as how the structure could be made stronger or what could be added to make it taller. This type of support encourages children to think, solve problems and try new ideas while remaining in control of their play. Careful observation is another key role of adults, as it helps them understand children's interests, strengths, and areas where support may be needed, allowing them to plan future learning opportunities. Adults must also ensure that the environment is safe while still allowing children to take appropriate risks. By balancing supervision with freedom, adults help children develop confidence, independence, creativity and important social and problem solving skills.

Self directed play is strongly supported by developmental theory. Vygotsky (1978) agreed that play allows children to operate within their zone of proximal development, where they can perform tasks they cannot yet accomplish independently but can achieve with guidance or collaboration. For many years, even leading theorists did not question the idea that children's cognitive development can often be better understood through the tasks they accomplish with support from others rather than what they achieve on their own (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 85). Jerome Bruner further explains that adult guidance in play often involves scaffolding, where support is provided only for the aspects of a task beyond a child's current ability, allowing them to focus on what they can manage independently (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976, p. 90). Through self directed play, children actively explore, experiment, and take risks in a safe and motivating context, stretching their cognitive and social abilities. They learn to plan, problem solve, negotiate, and cooperate with peers, while adults provide subtle guidance that fosters independence, resilience, and

confidence. This approach ensures that children remain in control of their play while developing essential skills across multiple areas of learning.

The importance of self-directed play also lies in the freedom and choice it provides. When children select activities that interest them, they are more likely to sustain attention and engage deeply, allowing learning to occur naturally within enjoyable experiences. As Play Wales states “Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas, and interests.” (Play Wales, n.d). For example, a child who chooses to role-play as a gardener is not only developing fine motor skills through handling tools but is also practising language, problem solving, and cooperative skills as they explain their ideas to others. Outdoor self directed play supports physical health, confidence, and risk assessment, while indoor creative play enhances imagination, communication and collaboration. Across all contexts, self directed play enables children to explore their interests, develop resilience, and build key social and cognitive skills that contribute to holistic growth.

Part 3

Observation in early childhood is the careful process of watching, listening to, and recording children’s behaviour, interactions, skills, and responses in real life contexts. Unlike structured assessments, it focuses on children as engaged learners, capturing what they do naturally rather than following adult led tasks. Observation helps practitioners understand development across cognitive, social, emotional, communication, and physical aspects, providing evidence to inform planning, support, and assessment. It allows adults to recognise strengths, emerging skills, and areas needing extra support, ensuring learning experiences meet each child’s needs. By understanding children’s interests and preferred ways of learning, observation supports the design of meaningful, engaging activities, encourages exploration and curiosity, and helps identify any developmental concerns early so timely support or intervention can be provided.

Observation also helps practitioners reflect on their practice by considering how effective their teaching methods, environments, and responses to children are. Recording observations allows practitioners to share children’s progress with parents

and carers and discuss areas for development. Overall, observation supports good practice by recognising each child's individuality and supporting the planning of learning that are inclusive and appropriate for their development. The Welsh Government highlights that practitioners should observe children in a variety of situations during the day, including indoors and outdoors and in both independent and group play, to develop a clearer understanding of their abilities and development. These observations should be recorded clearly and then used to support planning for future learning experiences and the learning environment (Welsh Government, 2021).

Unlike checklists or rating scales, running records give a detailed, continuous account of a child's actions, interactions, dialogue, and emotions. They can be used during play, group activities, or structured tasks, focusing on individuals or specific behaviours without disrupting the activity. Running records provide qualitative insights into how children solve problems, communicate, collaborate, and express ideas and feelings, capturing multiple areas of development cognitive, social, emotional, communication, and physical at once. They help practitioners identify patterns, inform planning, reflect on teaching effectiveness, and communicate concrete evidence of development to parents. They are a valuable method for observing children but have some limitations. They can be time-consuming, require close attention, and work best with one child at a time. Personal bias may affect what is recorded and how behaviours are described, and a single record captures only one moment, which may not reflect overall development. However, when used regularly and alongside other evidence, running records provide detailed insight into children's learning and development. Carefully recorded observations are a key part of research and assessment, offering richer understanding than informal notes alone. Vygotsky acknowledged that when carried out objectively and with scientific thoroughness, such observations can be considered reliable and valid evidence (Vygotsky, 1978).

Running records provide a holistic view by documenting behaviour across multiple areas of development in real-life situations. Unlike checklists or scales, they capture how children think, communicate, move, and interact socially. Showing not just what they can do but how they approach tasks, solve problems, and engage with others. Recording behaviour over time helps practitioners identify patterns, strengths, and

areas for support, informing child centred planning. When used alongside other tools and repeated observations, running records reveal children's abilities, creativity, motivation, and relationships, supporting teaching, assessment, and engagement. The value of running records depends on frequency and context. A single observation may only show one aspect of development, so multiple records across days and activities are needed. Combined with other observation methods and reflective practice, they provide a detailed picture of a child's development.

Part 4

Play supports observing and assessing children because it provides a natural context to see learning and development. It allows children to express themselves freely, showing their abilities, interests and understanding naturally. Play also combines many skills at once for example, building with blocks involves fine motor skills, communication, cooperation, and persistence making it easier for adults to assess development holistically than through formal assessments. Observing play captures how children engage with their environment, solve problems, and interact with others without adult pressure, revealing skills that planned assessments may miss. When engaged in activities they enjoy, children reveal their thinking, social skills, and problem-solving more authentically. Play also highlights individual strengths and interests, as children are more engaged and motivated when choosing their own activities, giving practitioners a better understanding of what they can do.

Effective observation enables us to analyse what we see and hear, and to respond in ways that will help children make progress. We should use these observations to inform current and future planning in our setting. Our observations may be planned and specific; they may be timed over a period or be spontaneous occurrences when something new or significant is noticed. Using a range of observation techniques will ensure that we obtain detailed understanding of each child. Welsh Government (2021). P.37

Research and theory support the idea that observing children in play gives a more complete view of development. Vygotsky (1978) recognised that play lets children practise skills just beyond their current abilities with subtle support from adults or peers, revealing both what they can do now and their potential to grow. It also allows practitioners to observe qualities like creativity, imagination, empathy, and

negotiation that formal tests may miss. The Welsh Assembly believe play includes children's actions that are freely chosen, directed by themselves, and motivated from within. It is undertaken for its own sake rather than for any external reward and is essential for healthy development not just for the individual child, but also for the wider community. Play is vital for developing children's physical, social, emotional, mental, and creative abilities, so communities should actively support it and provide environments that encourage it.

Adults support children's learning in play by knowing when to step back and let children lead. A strong understanding of child development helps practitioners recognise what skills children are ready to practise and how to gently extend their learning. Knowing each child's interests, confidence and abilities allows adults to offer meaningful support that motivates and engages. Skilled observation is key, enabling adults to notice subtle behaviours, understand children's thinking and know when to offer help without directing the play. Creating an enabling environment is also essential; spaces and resources should be safe, flexible, and stimulating, encouraging exploration, creativity, and independent problem solving. By using careful observation, a strong understanding of child development, and carefully planned environments, adults can support children in ways that encourage engagement and learning while allowing play to remain child led, enjoyable and intrinsically motivated.

Howard and McInnes' research highlights that children's perceptions of play affect their wellbeing and learning. When children see an activity as play, they show higher emotional wellbeing, emphasising that adults must consider children's own definitions when observing and assessing behaviour. Simply labelling an activity as play is not enough; careful, sensitive observation is essential.

Their findings also show that excessive adult presence can reduce playfulness. Practitioners should observe discreetly, respect children's perspectives, and create opportunities for exploration and engagement. This ensures assessments capture authentic learning, social and emotional behaviours, providing a deeper understanding of each child's development and wellbeing and reinforcing that play is both a feeling and thinking experience, not just a set of actions.

In conclusion, play is essential for holistic development, supporting children's physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and communication growth. Self directed, child led play allows children to explore, problem solve and practise skills within their zone of proximal development, while adults provide supportive guidance without controlling the activity. Observation, including running records, enables practitioners to understand children's abilities, interests and social interactions, informing planning and assessment. Respecting children's perspectives and providing diverse play opportunities ensures engagement, motivation, and wellbeing. Overall, integrating play, careful observation, and adult scaffolding fosters authentic learning, creativity, confidence, and a deeper understanding of each child's development.

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