

Children's Play: Theory and Practice.**Section One**

One of the most important aspects of a child's life is play. Throughout the course of childhood, children learn how to socially interact and how to think creatively whilst developing new skills and learning through play (Johnson, Sevimli-Celik & Almansour, 2012). The significance of play is identified internationally and plays a part in every child's development. Play is central to learning however according to McInnes, et al. (2013) play has been based on an adult's perception to the act and can be difficult to define. Hewes (2010) suggests that play is one of the most effective approaches to completing a task as it comes from the child's perspective. The construct of play has been considered to promote motivation, enthusiasm, and the willingness to engage with those around and is important for personal development (Dewey, 1933).

Previous studies regarding children's perception of play show that children use cues, these cues help children to differentiate between tasks or activities that are play led learning and ones that are not. Cue development is related to the environment or the classroom experience. Children who are taught in less structured settings are not able to differentiate between play and non-play tasks. Conversely, a child who is in a directed setting has a clearer view on how to separate the two tasks and take a less playful approach (Howard, Bellin, and Rees 2003; Karrby 1989).

The theory of play is many ideas surrounding the effects of cognitive development through childhood. There are different formats of play in early years which can help practitioners in a school setting which will in turn help the children develop. One being, Independent Play. This type of play develops when the child begins to play by themselves. Allowing a child to play independently helps teach them to be self-sufficient (onlinelearningcollege, 2022). Explained by O'Connor & Neuhaus (2021) independent play promotes the opportunity to develop problem solving skills and their own sense of agency. It is important to help a child through learning, but equally important to allow the child to pick something of interest to play with. It is important for a child to perceive an activity as play as they have an increase in emotional wellbeing. Play with adults may have limitations, independent play allows their imagination

and creativity to prosper. They are more likely to be engaged and to participate for a longer amount of time (Howard and McInnes, 2012).

A second type of play is constructive play, which is a way for a child to manipulate objects or toys in order to create something (McIlroy, 2023). Constructive play has many benefits for children. It helps improve their problem-solving skills, allows their imagination and creativity to flourish and helps them explore shapes and symmetry. One example being, Lego Therapy. This is a child-led and peer-based activity that aims to promote a willingness to interact. There are many skills that the child will develop through this play, children will learn to take turns with friends, it promotes teamwork to reach an end goal and provides opportunities to make conversation (LeGoff, et al (2014). According to Celestine (2021) this activity will help increase their social confidence and independence for children who have difficulty in communication skills.

Piaget's theory of play suggests that there are two key processes. One process being assimilation which is the process of taking in and understanding the information fully and to investigate the child's behaviours and thought patterns, these are known as schemas (Burgemeester, 2014). Burgemeester (2014) explains the child creates their own experiences through the knowledge they have gained as the child develops. This skill will allow the child to build on their existing experiences, help them to interact with the people around them and to adapt to different people and different environments. Piaget's theory prioritises four stages of cognitive development.

Sensorimotor; This stage starts at birth and reaches up to the age of two. Piaget explains at this stage, babies and toddlers live in the present and only have their five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch (boppy, 2020).

The second stage is **The Preoperational Stage;** carrying on from the first stage, starting at the age of two years old, approximately the development of their speech skills, and up to the age of seven the child will essentially start to role play; however, this is limited depending on their imagination and experiences. They will only look at the world from their point of view (Rochat, 2023).

The third stage; **The Concrete Operational Stage;** According to Piaget, this stage will last up until the age of eleven. At this stage a child will be able to identify their own thoughts and feelings and become empathetic towards others. They're also able to deal with mathematical problems and classify objects.

The final stage is **The Formal Operational Stage**; this final stage is carried through to adulthood. This is when the young person develops their logical thinking from their own experiences, and they will continue to use this skill and knowledge throughout their life. They will be able to form discussions, argue and able to think independently (Rochat, 2023).

Piaget's theory suggests that the four main stages as listed above, will help the child develop their cognition, it will help guide them in different situations with what actions they can take and to help understand what effect their actions have and whether that is the correct action to take. Of course, it is important for the child to have the appropriate stimuli and environment at the right time, for the right age range. Piaget's four stages can helpfully guide parents/guardians and teachers into organising the appropriate play for the different stages and advise what will help them onto the next stage. Piaget's theory suggests that a child's development can stop and start every so often. However, according to Burgemeester (2014) assimilation can take time and the period that the child remains in each stage isn't controlled by the parent/guardian or teacher but by the child's cognitive development. Vygotsky underpinned this by stating that children don't stop and start but they learn continuously through the stages. Vygotsky believed that all babies are born with four elementary mental functions, which are attention, sensation, perception, and memory (McLeod, 2024). Vygotsky's theory of proximal development (ZPD) represents what a child can do independently and what is achievable with an adult's guidance. Interactions with an adult/caregiver can significantly impact a child's cognitive development. Vygotsky explained that cognitive development is governed by social and cultural factors. Adults convey cultural responses to the world around them helping shape how children think. Vygotsky's theory helps encourage cooperative learning at home and in an educational setting (McLeod, 2024).

Section Two

Howard & McInnes (2012) state that there is an increase in children's emotional wellbeing when children perceive an activity in the form of play. McInnes et al. (2009) furthers this point of how important it is for adults to stand back and observe whilst allowing the child to pick their form of play. Children's well-being is emphasized in the United Nations Rights of the Child (Unicef, 2009) and is important to how it affects all aspects of the child's development. It is important to ensure that children have time to choose self-directed activities. This is a type of play where children are allowed to play without adult interference

and make up their own rules (Welljourn, 2020). Self-directed play helps build confidence in children and fosters their independence; this allows them to take initiative without adult supervision. Allowing a child to pick their activity helps build problem solving skills and sparks creativity. With an adult observing but not directing them, children then create their own narrative or simply solve a problem by looking at ways around the issue. As they have no rules to follow, they unknowingly develop the skill for problem-solving (WellJourn, 2020).

Montessori education is an approach to learning that helps encourage self-directed learning. Dr Maria Montessori found through hands on activities and collaborative play, we help children facilitate their social, emotional, and cognitive wellbeing while developing independence (Ruhl, 2024). Self-directed play is a fundamental part of the Montessori method in education. It enables children to make their own choices while expanding on their interest and curiosities. In a Montessori classroom, children are able to work independently or as a group and choose what materials they would like to explore or work with. This way of education help stimulate creativity, to work their way around problem solving skills and to help spark their imagination. This method promotes purposeful play and helps develop a sense of self-motivation (Ruhl, 2024).

In self-directed play, it is important that adults allow the children to take the lead. The adult can observe the activities, recognise the importance of play and interruptions should only happen if needed to allow the child to engage in meaningful play (Bianquin, 2018). A few of the main key aspects of child led activities according to Amin (2022) are valuing play time for children, to help make thinking explicit, to engage with the children, to encourage curiosity and inquiry but to also be a co-explorer. When children encounter a challenge while exploring, without the adult providing the answer, they can be of help by discussing the issue and solving the problem together. It is important that adults are actively engaged with children during play time. By simply crouching down to the child's level, this helps encourage children to explain not only their thought process but their problems. This simple interaction helps promote a deeper learning and understanding. It also plays a part in the curiosity of the child, if the adult probes questions to help extend the play instead of giving direct answers this will help develop their line of enquiry. Grindheim (2017) furthers this by explaining that from a child's point of view, play is how a child expresses themselves, is able to show how their feeling in the moment and a child will play no matter what a teacher or caregiver gives as a task. McInnes et al. (2010) states that through a study they conducted,

children had better results when an adult was not present. The freedom the child had from being able to choose their task and see it as play, in turn gave a better outcome of results as opposed to the adult being present. If children, see an activity as play based and not as a task their personal wellbeing is significantly improved, and this will lead to making progress with their learning.

Section Three

Observation methods in the early years setting is crucial to help understand the child's personal development and growth. Observations provide the adult with valuable insights into their interactions with others, their behaviour around others and their development of learning. The EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage Framework) requires all practitioners to document a child's observation but how an observation is completed varies. This means you can choose an observation method to suit your space (GOV.UK, 2024). Through observation, practitioners/ caregivers gain a deeper understanding of not only a child's needs, but their strengths and weaknesses. An observation will allow them to see progress of the child and will help identify developmental milestones (SAGE, no date). Hobart and Frankel (1999) state it will also help to ensure the correct support is given when the child has reached those milestones. Close observations help the adult identify challenging behaviours and will help enable them to address those behaviours and provide an intervention or assistance if needed. GOV.UK (2024) explain that observing how a child communicates with their peers along with adult interaction helps understand a child's emotional development. Adults can then adapt to not only their communication needs but help design activities that align with the child's abilities and interests to promote growth and exploration.

The Schedule of Growing Skills (SOGS) is a tool used to help assess and measure a child's development in key areas. In both strengths and potential delays, it helps create a reliable outlook on the child's development. This style of assessment is thought to be a way to put parents/ caregivers at ease, allowing them to have an easier discussion for any concerns or delays (Welsh Government, 2018). There are nine key areas in which this observation helps take a snapshot of a child's development, including speech and language, hearing visual abilities, interactive social skills, locomotor skills, posture and self-care social skills. It is an observation that is efficient and reliable for a childcare setting as it is a rapid measure of their development. SOGS help create an outlook of the child's personal strengths and potential

delays in development, which in turn help the caregiver/practitioner tailor interventions that are appropriate to their needs. This observation also helps highlight key issues if a child shows signs of needing additional support. However, according to Goodie, et al. (2014) there are limitations to this observation method. SOGS may not provide all aspects of a child's development as it focuses on specific areas. It is only for a specific age range, therefore it decreases for the older children. In an assessment like this, the results can also be influenced by the child's environment or surroundings. If this assessment is completed by an adult that the child isn't familiar with, it may deter them to be at their full potential, they may get nervous, act shy or potentially misbehave. While this assessment does cover majority of a child's development stages, it may not assess other aspects of the child's development such as, their cognitive development and emotional wellbeing.

Section Four

Stated by Howard and McInnes (2012) when observing a child, play is an important part of development. Through play, we can assess what a child's strengths and weaknesses are. An observation through play helps understand what their interests, learning styles and abilities are. Young children's learning is evident in their play and interaction with adults or most importantly their peers. Curriculum For Wales (2022) state that observations through play helps the adult to understand what their interests are which help tailor their individual tasks and activities for each child's interests and abilities. A detailed observation will help deepen their understanding of the children's development which is important to know when completing an informed assessment. It is important that children are uniquely celebrated instead of being expected to follow the same progress (SAGE, no date). When children are given time to play and choose activities by themselves, they are often able to work things out – which develops their skill of problem solving. Exploring ideas and making their own decisions will develop their critical thinking skills. This is an important skill to have as it helps encourage them to be more independent and self – sufficient (Stixrud & Johnson, 2022).

Knowing the children that are being observed is crucial. It will allow the observer to assess at a deeper level if the adult knows of the child's likes and dislikes. Each child has a different personality, what their preferences are and what needs they may have. If the adult knows the child being observed, they are able to tailor their approach to the child's specific characteristics (PACEY, 2016). Showing an interest in children's play can help improve their

motivation for their task and their engagement throughout. Amin (2022) explains taking the child's thoughts and feelings into consideration, by thinking aloud or asking questions to the child, children are able to learn and think independently. If a child is finding it hard to complete a task they've set themselves, it is beneficial that the adult goes down to their playing level, ask them how they are getting on and offer help, whether the child takes on the advice or the help the adult has given, this will help to guide them on how to think through problems and help produce a successful outcome. Amin (2022) continues, when a child is faced with a task they can begin to self – regulate their own learning. It is beneficial to the child if the adult probes questions instead of giving them the answer as it opens their minds to new possibilities. The adult should remain as a co-explorer to the child's task, asking questions and exploring the environment with the child. When an adult listens to the child and shows that they value their opinion, they are able to be challenged passed their comfort zones. Howard and McInnes (2012) support this by saying when children undertake a task and perceive it as a form of play, they will show signs of their emotional wellbeing. When a child participates in an adult-led activity, they have less motivation to finish the task and will see it as something they must do, rather than enjoy doing. In contrast, children who are in an adult-led activity may show signs of negative behaviours and may become easily distracted. Howard and McInnes (2012) explain children that perceive an activity as play will have superior developmental effect as children are able to reach out of their comfort zone knowing that there is minimal risk of failure. When children control the narrative and the possible outcome of their actions, this will allow them to increase their confidence.

To observe a child during play, an adult will see the very best potential of what the child can do. Every child is unique, allowing them to be independent and getting to know them individually allows the adult to support their growth and development.

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