

Children's Play: Theory and Practice

Section 1

What is Play?

According to Play Wales (2022) playing is one of the most important aspects of a child's life and it will occur wherever children spend time. They believe children should choose freely when, how and what to play and agree that there should be no intended outcome to play and that it should be intrinsically motivated allowing children to enjoy as much as possible.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992) agree that all children have the right to engage in play and activities that are suitable to their age.

Creative Play

Creative play is any play that allows the child to use their imagination whilst expressing and exploring their creativity. Children can play creatively in many different areas such as painting, storytelling, block building, making music or dance (Bruce 2011).

Welsh Government (no date) believe that allowing children to be creative in their play will support their speech and language and communication skills as well as their social and physical skills allowing for development holistically. For example, communication and social skills will be developed when they interact with other children and adults in the setting during their play. This will allow them to build relationships and bonds with others. Building with blocks can help to develop the child's gross motor skills and using scissors for cutting and sticking activities can help develop fine manipulative skills and hand-eye coordination.

Welsh Government (2008) state that creative play should reflect children's individuality, their preferences, ideas and own interests. They agree that creativity should be developed indoors and outdoors in rich environments that offer opportunities to experiment with new experiences and resources that stimulate their imagination. They claim that if the above is met accordingly then children's holistic development will flourish, and they will gain the skills to allow them to communicate, collaborate and evaluate their own work as well as others.

According to Pathways (2023) creative play can be part of all stages of play including unoccupied play (birth to 3 months) solitary play (3 months-2 years) onlooker play (2 years) parallel play (2 years plus) associate play (3-4 years) and cooperative play (4 years plus). They believe this to be true as all stages of play include being creative and exploring.

However, they believe that there will be more progress in the associate play and cooperative play stages as it involves using their imagination, self-expression and inventiveness and it is in these stages of play that children are more aware of these attributes.

Motor/Physical Play

Physical play is the play that connects to the development of a child's body control and coordination of their large movements, fine manipulative skills, balance and spatial awareness. Physical play can also relate to the child's knowledge and understanding of their physical well-being and health (Welsh Government 2008).

Archer (2015) suggests that children who understand that their bodies need movement and participate in physical play will learn to regulate their emotions better. She agrees that children translate their physical experiences into information they can use to regulate their own thoughts, emotions and behaviours.

According to Welsh Government (2008) space indoors and outdoors is essential for physical movement so that children can experiment without restrictions to develop spatial awareness. They believe it benefits a child to have access to small and large equipment that they can access and use independently so they can develop their gross motor and fine manipulative skills. They agree that physical play can help a child's holistic development as physical skills can be linked to cognitive skills, perceptual development, visual skills and vocabulary relating to physical activity. These skills will enhance in a stimulating environment when the opportunity to explore is encouraged.

Physical play is supported by the Montessori approach. LePort Montessori Schools (2014) suggest that to encourage motor/physical play environments should consist of purposeful physical activities such as pouring, stacking and manipulating objects to encourage the holistic development. They believe that children should part take in action songs and rhymes to encourage movement and that all equipment in the setting should be at the child's height to allow movement and climbing as they please. They encourage the use of balls in open spaces so children can throw and chase allowing physical development to occur.

Pathways (2023) state that physical play starts from unoccupied play as babies will begin to make movements with their arms, legs, hands and feet. During this type of play they will be exploring and discovering how their body moves. As they progress through the stages of play,

physical play will become more developed as children learn how to roll, crawl, walk, run and climb.

According to Welsh Government (2008) the role of the adult during play is to understand the importance of a child's development and to plan and facilitate appropriate experiences to encourage holistic development. They agree that adults should encourage, motivate and help to develop positive attitudes and be available to offer support to a child when needed. A practitioner also needs to ensure they recognise that all children are different, each child has different abilities and that all children will have different interests and they should be encouraged to explore these to allow for growth in their development.

During play, children should access different aspects of the six areas of learning, also known as, expressive arts, humanities, health and well-being, science and technology, mathematics and numeracy and language, literacy and communication, and play will interconnect through all areas and cross over during different play activities (Welsh Government 2022).

Section 2

Self-directed play and its importance

Self-directed play is the play that children lead themselves where they decide what, where and how to play and take control of the use of materials and who they include in the play. Adults should stand back and allow children to use their imagination to develop their personal ideas and allow them to make their own rules during this play. Self-directed play should be for the child's own satisfaction and have no intended outcome from adults (Learning through Landscape 2013). Allowing children to participate in self-directed play will help children to be able to follow their own interests and play at a level that is suited to their personal abilities.

Howard (2020) states that play is important for children's health and development and is a valuable way to learn skills that will be necessary to children for later in life. She believes that play can be an important way to shape learning and is a key ingredient for healthy body and mind.

Moyles (2009) agrees that play is powerful and believes that it deepens children's learning and understanding while enabling them to learn from first hand experiences, based on what they already know and what they can already do.

Howard and McInnes (2012) believe that if children perceive an activity as play, they will show more signs of emotional well-being during the time spent playing rather than if the activity was being perceived by them as not play. McInnes *et al.* (2013) believe that children perceive an activity as play if they make the choice to complete the activity themselves, if there is no adult present at the activity and if the activity is not at a table. They believe that children will show more interest in the activity perceived as play if it is a free choice made by themselves and will usually stay longer at the activity and complete it with more accuracy.

Wilson (2016) believes that children perform better and enjoy more at an activity if there is intrinsic motivation rather than participation due to external reward. He agrees that external rewards such as dojo points or stickers, may work at times or for some children but believes that children often get greater satisfaction from completing an activity purely for fun.

According to Maynard, Waters and Clement (2013) self-directed play that takes place outdoors in natural green spaces can amplify the child-initiated learning. They believe that children who are shy can often become more confident during these activities and become leaders during their play, children who can present as boisterous or aggressive can often become calm and more focused during these activities and children who struggle more academically, will often experience success in self-directed outdoor experiences. Self-directed play will allow for confidence to progress and social interactions to become more appropriate therefore they will learn valuable skills needed to positively influence their future.

Birth to 5 matters (2020) state that although adults can facilitate children's learning through adult-led activities that include first-hand experiences, conversations and taking part in practising certain skills, it is also important that adults are aware of how to support children in self-directed play. They agree that adults must have a deep understanding of how different play types can support children's learning and development to ensure they provide meaningful opportunities for self-directed play.

Oxfordshire County Council (no date) and Swansea University (2023) agree that adults can help to facilitate self-directed play by ensuring there are resources, spaces and images available that will "spark metaludes" and encourage the children to engage in self-directed play. They believe that adults can support the play cycle by not taking control of the play or trying to rescue the play, also known as adulteration. Swansea University (2023) believe that adults can use play maintenance and act as an observer during the play or act as a resource for

play, for example, handing a child an object that could progress the play. They agree that adults should wait for cues from children that invite them into the play before they engage in medial involvement of the activity.

Edutopia (2019) believe that adults can support self-directed play by ensuring that the learning environment is calm and peaceful and has aspects of nature, allowing for brain architecture to build, which will then ensure children learn more and develop holistically. They agree that children gain more from having routine, consistency and calm as this allows them to focus on the important things and filter out other things that are happening all at the same time. They also agree that the environment should be safe and welcoming and allow children to feel loved and looked after.

Section 3

Observations

In the early years sector, observation is known as the practice of looking at and listening to children to enable adults to find out what they want to know about children. Observations can be used to find out what children like doing, how they are developing and what they are learning through their play and available experiences (Early Years Matters 2023). Birth to 5 matters (no date) believe that practitioners should observe and assess children so that they can plan for further activities to ensure that they are supporting children appropriately whilst extending their learning. Bruce (2015) agrees that it is important to observe children in a variety of situations to enable a full understanding of the child. She believes that observing children at play is essential to find out how to develop the learning as it gives a better insight into what they are interested in. Adults can then use the information gathered during the observation process to plan for further activities that will engage children and develop their knowledge.

According to Howard and McInnes (2012) it is important that adults carry out observations during play as it gives a more accurate reflection of the child's development. They believe this to be true as children feel more comfortable and have better emotional well-being when participating in play like activities. Welsh Government (2023) believe that observation for assessment should be an ongoing process and carried out routinely to ensure that the child's progression needs can be met through practitioners planning.

Running Record/Written Observation

U.S Department of health and human services (2023) state that a running record/written observation needs to provide accurate and objective information and an unbiased view of the child being observed. They believe it can be a useful method of observation as it provides a detailed account of everything the practitioner sees regarding a child, for example, what they play with, what they do with the resources, who they chose to include or interact with and how they react to situations that occur. However, they also believe that running records can be hard to maintain as some information could be missed while the observer is writing. They agree that to complete a running record practitioners should dedicate more time to stepping back and observing, therefore, it can be a time-consuming method of observation.

According to Bruce, Louis and McCall (2015) when making observation using the method of running record/written observation it can be a good idea to use a sticky label pad for writing so that the information gathered can be noted down in detail without the child feeling that they are being watched. This allows for the children to feel more confident and relaxed in what they are doing as they perceive it to be a play-based activity when adults are out of proximity, which allows them to give a truer representation of what is being observed (Howard and McInnes 2012).

A disadvantage of using a running record/written observation is that it only captures the information that is happening there and then at the time. It gives no background information such as causes to behaviour, environmental factors that can have effect on emotional well-being or developmental factors that the children may have. To gain a holistic view of the child's development and understanding during observation, is it important that practitioners are open to using a range of observational methods. According to the Froebel trust (2019) it could be useful to use digital tools during observations as it supports observation 'on the go' and can capture progress and learning 'in the moment'. They agree that these methods can give possibilities for documentation in new formats such as video, still image and sound. This enables the practitioner to also share assessment with young children who may not yet be able to read print observations.

Thomas and Lewis (2016) believe that to gain information that observations can not gather, it is important that practitioners communicate and liaise with parents, other practitioners and multiagency workers to ensure that a holistic view of the child's development is available. It is also important that practitioners carrying out observations have a good understanding of child development to enable them to determine if progress is being made by the child.

Section 4

According to Howard and McInnes (2012) it is important that when observing and assessing children it is done through play. They believe this to be important because they believe it gives a more accurate reflection of their development as they agree that when children are engaged in what they perceive to be a play like activity they display a higher level of emotional well-being allowing them to feel more confident and comfortable in what they are doing which would then display a truer representation of what the adult is observing.

Wilson (2016) states that for children to gain as much as possible from an activity it needs to be self-directed and intrinsically motivated. He believes that practitioners should stand back and allow children to choose their own activities instead of encouraging them to participate by using external rewards such as moving their peg up on the rewards system for observational purposes. This then also allows children to portray a correct reflection of their knowledge and understanding as they will feel more involved when they choose a play activity for themselves to gain nothing else other than self-satisfaction and fun. However, according to Liu *et al.* (2022) it is the timing of the external rewards that can influence the intrinsic motivation. They believe that if the external reward is rewarded immediately, rather than delayed after the experiment, that it can enhance the intrinsic motivation.

Birth to 5 matters (no date) believe that it is important for practitioners to consider the holistic view of a child's development and learning to gain a professionally informed decision based on the observations carried out. They state that to do so it is essential that practitioners are aware of and fully understand children in their development, needs, likes and dislikes to judge children's progress accurately and determine if any support or extra provision is needed.

Even though Howard and McInnes (2012) state that observations would give a better understanding of children if completed during self-directed play and play-like activities, Neaum (2016) agrees that this can prove difficult at times as practitioners may need to assess children on a particular area of learning, for example, baseline assessments, that may not always be able to be completed through play if a child shows no interest in the activity put in provision to enable practitioners to carry out observation. Children would then need to be encouraged to engage in a certain activity using extrinsic motivation through external rewards. However, this could give an inaccurate observation as this could make the child aware that they are being watched, which may encourage decisions they make and in turn

impact the true play. Welsh Government (2023) agree that to avoid this happening there should be lots of opportunities using open ended play for children to engage in similar activities that encourage use of skills across all areas of learning, Expressive arts, Health and well-being, Humanities, Language, literacy and communication, Mathematics and numeracy and science and technology.

Dale and Beloglovsky (2023) believe that when interacting with loose parts it promotes thinking that leads to problem solving and theoretical reasoning as they enter a world of 'what if?'. They believe that loose parts enhance children's ability to think imaginatively while giving a sense of excitement and adventure to their play. With an adult's support to engaging activities such as loose parts this would enable observations to gather accurate information that would allow practitioners the use of, for future planning for individual children.

Welsh Assembly Government (2008) believe that when practitioners observe children frequently, they will become accustomed to observation and are more likely to continue with their play while being observed causing less disruption and a more accurate representation of the child's knowledge and understanding of what is being observed. Welsh Government (2023) agree with this and state that practitioners should observe children throughout the day, indoors and outdoors, during all types of play to gain a holistic picture of the child and how they respond in a range of situations with different people at different times.

To gain good information from observation it is important that children are confident in exploring the setting to enable them to portray a true reflection of their knowledge and understanding of what is being observed. John Bowlby's attachment theory (cited Holmes, 2014) states that it is vital that practitioners form strong bonds with children and that children feel that they can trust them. Consistency with the relationship and trust is vital so that the children feel a sense of belonging and professional love which will enable them enough confidence to explore the setting.

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