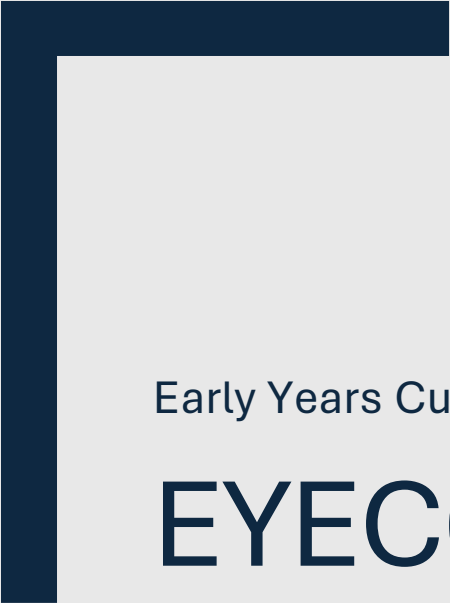
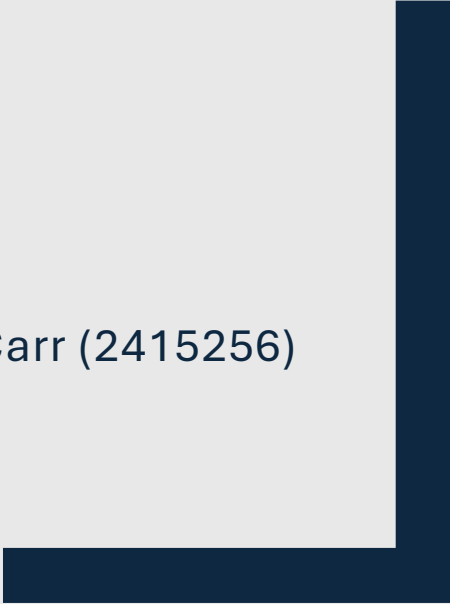




Early Years Curricula

EYEC6010

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AI Statement

I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com/>) on 6th June 2026 to support the development of this assessment.

ChatGPT was used to:

- support proofreading, grammar, sentence clarity and academic flow.

I confirm that I have not presented AI-generated text as my own work.

I confirm that I have retained copies of my drafts, notes and supporting materials before and after the use of AI tools, which I may be asked to provide as evidence.

The challenges of implementing the playwork curriculum within real holiday club and out of school provisions in Wales.

Play is recognised as fundamental to children's wellbeing, development and participation, with Welsh policy increasingly emphasising children's rights and access to meaningful play opportunities (United Nations, 1989; Welsh Government, 2024). The Playwork Curriculum supports the implementation of the Playwork Principles and guides practitioners in out-of-school settings such as holiday clubs, and community provision. Rooted in the belief that play should be freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated, it positions playworkers as facilitators rather than instructors (Play Wales, 2015; Play Wales, 2022). Its development aligns with Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Welsh Government initiatives promoting play sufficiency and wellbeing (United Nations, 1989; Welsh Government, 2025).

However, whilst the curriculum provides an important framework, translating its principles into practice is often complex. Regulatory requirements, financial constraints, workforce pressures, temporary play spaces and the diverse needs of children can create tensions between playwork ideals and implementation (King and Newstead, 2026). This suggests that there may be a persistent gap between policy aspirations and the realities of practice, raising questions about the extent to which the curriculum is achievable across all settings.

This essay critically analyses these challenges, focusing on pack-away environments, inclusion and Additional Learning Needs (ALN), environmental affordances and the temporary nature of attendance.

Environmental Affordances and Pack-Away Provision

A key challenge is the creation and maintenance of rich play environments. The curriculum promotes access to varied play elements, including loose parts, natural materials, risk and sensory experiences (Play Wales, 2015). Principle 5 states that playworkers should support children in creating spaces where they can play (Playwork

Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005). However, consistent provision of these elements is often difficult.

The concept of environmental affordances provides a useful lens through which to examine this challenge. Gibson (1979) argues that environments provide opportunities for action, shaping children's play. Nicholson (1971) suggests that creativity increases with the variety of materials available, while Hughes (2012) emphasises responsive spaces that follow children's play cues. Lester and Russell (2010) extend this by linking rich environments to wellbeing, resilience and belonging. Together, these perspectives show that play emerges through interaction between children's agency and their environment.

This is reflected in Welsh policy emphasising accessible, high-quality play opportunities (Welsh Government, 2023; 2024). However, questions remain as to whether temporary out-of-school settings can consistently provide these affordances. This highlights a mismatch between theoretical expectations and the structural limitations of pack-away environments, where consistency and access are restricted. This suggests that environmental affordances are not only shaped by physical space, but are also constrained by organisational and regulatory contexts, limiting the extent to which playwork ideals can be realised in practice. Consequently, whilst playwork theory emphasises flexibility and responsiveness, in practice these are unevenly distributed depending on the conditions of each setting, reinforcing inequalities in children's access to rich play opportunities.

Woolley and Lowe (2013) argue that shared venues often offer fewer opportunities than dedicated spaces, limiting activities such as water play, fire or large-scale construction due to restrictions and limited outdoor access. However, this view is contested.

Nicholson (1971) suggests creativity can arise from everyday materials, and Brown and Taylor (2008) argue that skilled playworkers can enhance environments through adaptation. While this indicates that constraints do not prevent quality playwork, relying on practitioners' creativity places significant demands on staff skills and resources. This

may underestimate the cumulative impact of limited space, time and resources, suggesting creativity alone cannot fully compensate for structural constraints.

Risk, Regulation and Structural Constraints

Financial pressures further restrict provision through transport, storage and staffing costs. Social Care Wales (2024) identifies workforce development and retention as ongoing challenges, whilst the Ministerial Review of Play highlights inequalities in access (Welsh Government, 2023). Principle 8 requires playworkers to balance risk with developmental benefit (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005), yet concerns around safety and liability may limit opportunities. Gill (2007) notes increasing risk aversion, despite recognised benefits of challenge (Hughes, 2012; Lester and Russell, 2010). This reflects tensions between playwork values and regulatory expectations (Russell, 2013; Welsh Government, 2023). Consequently, the curriculum may be viewed as aspirational in highly regulated contexts. This raises important questions about whether regulatory frameworks inadvertently prioritise risk management over developmental benefit, thereby constraining the very experiences that playwork seeks to promote. These challenges are intensified by the temporary nature of attendance. Playwork literature often assumes continuity of relationships over time (Brown and Taylor, 2008; Hughes, 2012), yet children may attend only briefly. While play supports wellbeing and belonging (Lester and Russell, 2010), Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights the importance of consistent relationships. This raises questions about whether belonging and ownership of play spaces can develop within fragmented attendance. This suggests that temporary provision may limit the depth of play experiences, challenging assumptions within playwork theory. It also suggests that the relational aspects of playwork, often considered central to its success, may be more fragile in practice than theoretical models imply.

Furthermore, policy emphasises belonging and participation (Welsh Government, 2024), yet these may be harder to establish in temporary provision. Conversely, King

and Newstead (2026) argue that meaningful play can occur within short periods when practitioners respond effectively to play cues. However, this may overlook the uneven quality of practice across settings, reinforcing that effectiveness often depends on practitioner competence rather than the curriculum itself.

Temporary Provision and Inclusive Practice

The temporary nature of provision also has significant implications for inclusion. Principles 1 and 2 emphasise freely chosen play (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005), aligning with Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognises every child's right to play (United Nations, 1989), and with the ALN Code for Wales, which promotes participation and equitable access for children with ALN (Welsh Government, 2021). However, practitioners may have limited knowledge of individual needs, and unfamiliar environments may increase anxiety or sensory challenges. This suggests that freely chosen play may not be equally accessible to all children, particularly those with ALN. King and Newstead (2026) found balancing inclusion, safeguarding and child-led play to be highly complex, highlighting tensions between autonomy and structured support.

Whilst playwork promotes child-led play, increasing regulation has contributed to more controlled childhoods (Gill, 2007). Some children require structure to access play, yet excessive adult intervention risks undermining autonomy. Therefore, inclusion within playwork must be understood beyond access, requiring a balance between support and agency. Russell (2013) highlights that playwork exists within an ongoing tension between children's autonomy and adult responsibility, suggesting that this balance is not easily achieved in practice. This reinforces the challenge for practitioners, as supporting individual needs may require intervention that risks conflicting with the child-led ethos of playwork. As a result, practitioners are required to exercise ongoing judgement, negotiating competing priorities rather than applying fixed approaches, which further complicates consistent implementation.

The Play Safety Forum (2012) further argues that risk should be managed rather than eliminated, recognising that opportunities for challenge contribute positively to children's development. Consequently, the role of the playworker is critical, requiring informed judgement rather than fixed approaches. Principle 6 emphasises knowledge and reflective practice, highlighting the need for practitioners to respond flexibly to complex and unpredictable situations. Effective inclusion requires an understanding of neurodiversity, emotional regulation and individual support needs, whilst policy frameworks continue to emphasise participation and belonging.

However, workforce shortages and limited training continue to present barriers. Social Care Wales (2024) highlights ongoing challenges, and King and Newstead (2026) identify tensions in practice. This reinforces that inclusion is shaped not only by curriculum intentions but by workforce capacity and professional development. This suggests that without sustained investment in training and workforce development, expectations of inclusive, responsive practice may remain unrealistic across much of the sector.

Ultimately, the Playwork Curriculum provides a valuable framework for supporting children's right to play, wellbeing and participation. However, its implementation within out-of-school provision is influenced by environmental constraints, temporary attendance patterns and the challenges of inclusive practice. Therefore, it can be argued that without addressing these systemic limitations, the Playwork Curriculum risks remaining an idealised model rather than a fully attainable reality across all out-of-school provision.

Whilst these factors do not prevent high-quality playwork from taking place, they require skilled practitioners capable of responding flexibly to children's diverse needs within changing environments. However, this also indicates that the success of the Playwork Curriculum is highly contingent on context, meaning that its implementation may vary significantly between settings rather than providing a consistent framework in practice. This suggests that variability in provision is not incidental, but an inherent feature of how the curriculum is currently enacted across different settings.

Taken together, this analysis suggests that the effectiveness of the Playwork Curriculum cannot be understood solely in terms of its principles, but must be evaluated in relation to the broader structural, organisational and socio-political contexts in which it is implemented.

From a professional playwork perspective, successful implementation requires more than access to resources and suitable environments. Playworkers must be able to establish trusting relationships quickly, respond flexibly to changing attendance patterns and recognise the diverse needs of children within short periods of time. This requires creativity, judgement and inclusive practice. Providing a combination of freely chosen play opportunities, focused activity areas, adaptable resources and transferable equipment may help settings balance the ideals of playwork with the practical realities of out-of-school provision whilst supporting children's creativity, agency and self-expression (Craft, 2002; Bruce, 2011). Ultimately, successful implementation depends on creating conditions that enable all children to access meaningful play opportunities. Whilst practitioner creativity may partially mitigate environmental constraints, the evidence suggests that structural factors such as funding, staffing and venue restrictions continue to significantly influence the extent to which playwork principles can be realised in practice.

Essay 2

Assessment and the 'Unique Child': A Critical Evaluation of Observation and Developmental Models in Playwork

The concept of the Unique Child recognises that children develop, learn and participate in different ways according to their individual experiences, abilities, interests and backgrounds (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Welsh Government, 2015; Welsh Government, 2022), challenging assumptions that development follows universal or predictable pathways.

The Foundation Phase recognised that children acquire and develop skills at different rates and should be allowed to progress at their own unique pace (Welsh Government, 2015). Similarly, Curriculum for Wales acknowledges that every child has distinct needs, strengths and aspirations requiring responsive learning experiences (Welsh Government, 2022). This perspective challenges traditional age-and-stage approaches to development, which can imply that children follow predictable and universal developmental pathways. In reality, children's development is influenced by a complex interaction of biological, social, cultural and environmental factors. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory suggests that children's development is shaped by relationships and experiences across multiple interconnected environments, including family, community, education and wider society. Consequently, children's development is often diverse and non-linear, raising questions about whether standardised developmental expectations can fully reflect the Unique Child. This suggests that reliance on standardised models risks oversimplifying children's development, potentially marginalising those whose learning does not conform to normative expectations

This perspective aligns closely with the Playwork Curriculum (Play Wales, 2015). Principle 2 states that play should be freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated, enabling children to determine the content and purpose of their own play

experiences (Play Wales, 2022). Rather than expecting all children to engage in identical activities or reach predetermined outcomes, playwork recognises that children express their learning, creativity and interests in different ways. Play-based theorists similarly emphasise children's agency, autonomy and active participation in learning (Piaget, 1952; Craft, 2002; Bruce, 2011).

However, recognising the Unique Child does not mean removing adult support. Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning is shaped through social interaction and scaffolding from more knowledgeable others. Within playwork, this suggests a careful balance is required: practitioners must protect children's autonomy whilst also recognising when support is needed to enable participation. This is particularly important for children with ALN, neurodivergent children and children with communication differences whose development and play may not fit age-related expectations (Welsh Government, 2021).

Within the Playwork Curriculum, assessment should therefore not be understood as formal testing or progress measurement, but as reflective observation of how children access, direct and experience play. Formal assessment risks shifting attention away from the play process and towards predetermined outcomes (Tierney, 2013). However, observation can support the Unique Child by identifying interests, communication styles and barriers to participation (Carr, 2001). For example, observations of children who use British Sign Language (BSL) or have hearing differences may inform adaptations such as visual prompts, signed vocabulary and alternative communication opportunities.

This approach is reflected within Chwarae o Safon, Play Wales' quality assurance framework for playwork settings, which identifies observation as a key method for understanding children's play and informing reflective practice (Play Wales, 2022). Practitioners are encouraged to use observations to improve play opportunities and evaluate the effectiveness of provision rather than assess children against predetermined outcomes (Play Wales, no date). This suggests that assessment within playwork is primarily concerned with understanding children's individual play

experiences and adapting environments to support participation, inclusion and wellbeing.

Nevertheless, this approach is not without limitations. Observation depends upon practitioner interpretation and may be influenced by adult assumptions, expectations or limited knowledge (Nutbrown, 2014). Tierney (2013) argues that assessment is never neutral and can affect children's identity, motivation and opportunity. Similarly, Welsh Government (2022) research found that observation-based assessment can become time-consuming, tick-box-focused and insufficiently tailored to individual learners. Parekh (2017) further warns that ideas of "ability" can categorise children in ways that reinforce inequality, while Alsubaie (2015) highlights how culture and communication influence how children participate and are understood. Therefore, whilst reflective observation can support the Unique Child within playwork, it requires skilled practitioners who understand child-led play, ALN, neurodiversity, culture and inclusive communication.

Whilst age-and-stage models have been widely used to understand children's development, their compatibility with the concept of the Unique Child remains contested. Piaget's (1952) theory of cognitive development suggests that children progress through universal stages of development, providing practitioners with a useful framework for understanding children's thinking and learning. Similarly, developmental milestones can help practitioners identify potential delays and provide appropriate support for children with ALN (Welsh Government, 2021).

However, Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasises the influence of family, community and wider social contexts, whilst Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning is shaped by social interaction and cultural experiences. Consequently, children may demonstrate skills, interests and competencies in different ways and at different times. Parekh (2017) further argues that developmental expectations can unintentionally categorise children according to perceived ability, potentially reinforcing inequalities and deficit views of difference. This suggests that age and stage models may oversimplify the complexity of children's development.

This critique is particularly relevant within playwork as the Playwork Curriculum places emphasis on the play process rather than developmental outcomes (Play Wales, 2015). From this perspective, assessing children against predetermined developmental expectations may risk overlooking the individuality, creativity and diverse ways in which children engage with play, reducing opportunities to recognise children's agency, imagination and unique developmental pathways (Craft, 2002; Parekh, 2017). Whilst age and stage models can provide useful reference points, they should therefore be used cautiously and alongside observations that recognise the unique strengths, interests and experiences of each child. Therefore, whilst observational assessment aligns more closely with the principles of the Unique Child by recognising children's individuality and diverse ways of participating, age-and-stage models may be less compatible when applied rigidly or without consideration of children's unique developmental pathways.

A further challenge concerns the practical realities of assessment within out-of-school provision. Unlike schools, where teachers often work with the same group of children throughout an academic year, attendance patterns in out-of-school provision may be more flexible and variable. Brown and Taylor (2008) emphasise the importance of building relationships in playwork practice, whilst Hughes (2012) argues that understanding children's play cues develops through observation over time. However, practitioners within out-of-school provision may have fewer opportunities to develop sustained relationships and gather comprehensive knowledge of children's interests, play behaviours and support needs. Consequently, the temporary nature of attendance can create challenges when attempting to understand the Unique Child through observation alone.

McCambridge, Witton and Elbourne (2014) suggest that, due to the Hawthorne Effect, children may alter their behaviour when they know they are being observed, or they may behave differently in unfamiliar settings, around unfamiliar adults, potentially limiting the reliability of conclusions drawn from short-term interactions. Consequently, observations collected during a single session may not always provide an accurate representation of a child's usual play behaviours, interests or abilities. These challenges

suggest that assessment within playwork should not be viewed as a process of producing definitive judgements about children. Instead, observations should be treated as provisional insights that inform immediate adaptations to environments, resources and practitioner responses. This approach aligns with playwork's emphasis on responsive practice, reflective observation and supporting the play process rather than measuring developmental outcomes (Hughes, 2012; Russell, 2013; Play Wales, 2022).

The effectiveness of this approach is heavily dependent upon practitioner knowledge and professional judgement. Principle 6 states that playworkers should respond to children's play based on up-to-date knowledge of the play process and reflective practice (Play Wales, 2022). Consequently, assessment within playwork is not simply a matter of recording behaviour, but of holistic interpretation of how children communicate, engage with their environment and experience play. This enables practitioners to respond to children's individual strengths, interests and communication preferences, and make appropriate adaptations that support a more personalised and inclusive approach to play.

The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings highlights the importance of using observations to adapt environments and experiences in response to children's interests and needs (Welsh Government, 2024). This approach aligns closely with playwork principles, suggesting that the purpose of assessment should not be to measure children against predetermined outcomes but to improve the quality of provision around them. Therefore, high-quality training and reflective practice are essential if observations are to support the Unique Child rather than simply categorise children's behaviour.

The concept of the Unique Child challenges practitioners to move beyond simplified views of development and recognise the diverse ways in which children learn, communicate and participate. Whilst age-and-stage models provide useful developmental reference points, they may overlook the complex social, cultural and individual factors that influence children's development. In contrast, the Playwork

Curriculum aligns closely with the principles of the Unique Child through its emphasis on freely chosen play, observation and responsive practice.

However, observational assessment is not without limitations, particularly within out-of-school provision where attendance patterns may be inconsistent, relationships are often short-term and practitioner interpretation can influence observations. Consequently, observational assessment aligns most closely with the concept of the Unique Child when used reflectively and alongside professional judgement, whereas age-and-stage approaches become more problematic when applied rigidly or without consideration of children's individual circumstances.

Ultimately, assessment within playwork should focus on understanding children's play experiences and adapting environments to support participation, inclusion and wellbeing rather than measuring children against predetermined developmental expectations. This suggests that assessment, when aligned with playwork principles, must remain flexible, interpretive and context-responsive, rather than standardised, if it is to genuinely support the concept of the Unique Child.

When Children Lead, We Follow

Making the Playwork Curriculum Work in Real Out-of-School Settings



Image 1: The Behavior Place, 2023.

Imagine opening your holiday club doors and allowing children complete freedom to play.

No timetable.

No planned crafts.

No adult-directed outcomes.

Just children leading their own play, following their interests and making their own choices.

Sounds simple, doesn't it?

In reality, delivering truly child-led play can be one of the most challenging aspects of working in out-of-school childcare.

In Wales, registered out-of-school clubs are expected to work in line with the Playwork Principles and Playwork Curriculum. At first glance, this can sometimes create confusion. Does child-led play mean practitioners step back and let children do whatever they want? Does it mean there should be no planned activities? And how do we balance children's freedom with inclusion, safety and quality experiences?

The answer is far more complex.

The Playwork Curriculum is not about stepping back and doing nothing. It is about creating environments where children can thrive, make choices, take ownership of their play and follow their own interests (Play Wales, 2022).

As practitioners, we need to move beyond asking:

"What activity are we doing today?"

and instead ask:

"What opportunities have we created for children to play?"

When children's voices, interests and wellbeing are placed at the centre of provision, play becomes far more than entertainment. It becomes a powerful tool for confidence, belonging, resilience and lifelong learning.

So why is this often easier said than done?

One of the biggest challenges is the environment itself.

Most out-of-school provision are pack-away settings. Unlike schools with dedicated classrooms and permanent resources, many clubs operate from community halls, scout huts, church halls or shared school spaces. Every day begins with setting up and ends with packing everything away again.

This immediately raises important questions.

Who controls the environment?

Where are resources stored?

How do we create rich play opportunities when everything has to be transported, unpacked and packed away again?

And perhaps most importantly, how do we create an environment that truly belongs to children when it is only ours for a few hours at a time?

Why Child-Led Play Matters



Image 2: Orlando Science Center, 2020.

One of the biggest misconceptions about child-led play is that adults simply stand back and do nothing. In reality, effective playwork requires skilled practitioners who observe,

adapt environments, support inclusion and respond thoughtfully to children's play cues (Play Wales, 2022).

Research consistently highlights the importance of play in supporting children's confidence, creativity, wellbeing and sense of belonging (Lester and Russell, 2010). Through play, children learn to solve problems, build relationships, manage emotions and make sense of the world around them. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises every child's right to play, whilst the Playwork Curriculum emphasises that play should be freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated (United Nations, 1989; Play Wales, 2022).

However, understanding the value of child-led play and implementing it successfully are often two very different things. For many practitioners, the challenge is not whether they believe in child-led play, but how they make it happen within the realities of modern out-of-school childcare.

When Children Lead, We Follow

1. Start with the Environment, Not the Activity

One of the biggest misconceptions about playwork is that good provision starts with planning activities. In reality, it starts with creating an environment that invites children to explore, imagine and take ownership of their play. Children rarely remember the activity adults planned for them. They remember the opportunities they discovered for themselves.

2. Offer Choice, Not Chaos

Child-led play does not mean children are left without support or structure. High-quality playwork involves creating a range of opportunities that allow children to make meaningful choices whilst still feeling safe and secure. The goal is freedom within a supportive environment, not complete absence of boundaries.

3. Think Loose Parts, Not Finished Toys

Nicholson's (1971) Theory of Loose Parts suggests that creativity increases when children have access to flexible, open-ended materials.

A cardboard box can become a castle, spaceship or secret hideout. Loose parts encourage imagination because they have no fixed purpose. Often, the simplest resources create the richest play experiences.

4. Create Spaces for Different Children

Not all children play in the same way. Some seek movement, noise and adventure, whilst others prefer quiet creativity, sensory experiences or construction play. Inclusive environments recognise these differences and provide opportunities for every child to participate and belong.

5. Observe Before You Intervene

One of the most valuable skills a playworker can develop is learning when to wait. Children often solve problems, negotiate disagreements and develop ideas more effectively when adults resist the temptation to immediately step in.

6. Support Without Taking Over

There is a significant difference between supporting play and directing it. Sometimes a simple question such as "What could you try next?" can be far more powerful than providing an answer.

7. Make Inclusion Everyone's Responsibility

The ALN Code for Wales highlights the importance of participation and equitable access for all children (Welsh Government, 2021).

Inclusion should never be an afterthought. Whether supporting children with ALN, communication differences, sensory needs or cultural differences, the responsibility lies

with practitioners to adapt environments and opportunities so that all children can participate meaningfully.

For example, observing how a deaf child communicates and interacts may highlight opportunities to introduce visual prompts, BSL signs, quieter spaces or peer communication activities that enhance participation without changing the child-led nature of the play.

8. Embrace Reasonable Risk

Play Wales (2013) argues that children benefit from opportunities to experience challenge and uncertainty as part of healthy development.

Children need opportunities to challenge themselves. Risk does not always mean danger. It means allowing children to test their abilities, make decisions and build confidence through real experiences. The role of the practitioner is to manage risk thoughtfully, not remove it completely.

9. Invest in Practitioner Training

Principle 6 highlights the importance of knowledgeable and reflective playworkers (Play Wales, 2022).

The success of any play-based curriculum depends upon the people delivering it. Understanding play cues, child development, inclusion, safeguarding and reflective practice enables practitioners to make informed decisions about when to step forward and when to step back.

10. Listen to Children

Lester and Russell (2010) argue that play contributes significantly to children's wellbeing, resilience and sense of belonging.

Perhaps the most important principle of all. Children will often tell us exactly what they need if we take the time to listen. Their interests, ideas and experiences should shape the provision we create.

Child-led play can sometimes feel impossible within modern childcare. Budgets are tight. Venues are shared. Resources need to be packed away at the end of every session. Children attend for different lengths of time and bring a wide range of interests, abilities and support needs.

Yet every day, practitioners across Wales find ways to make it happen.

The Playwork Curriculum is not about abandoning structure or leaving children to entertain themselves. It is about creating environments where children feel valued, capable and free to explore their own ideas.

When children lead, we follow.

Not because it is the easiest approach, but because it is often where the richest learning, strongest relationships and most meaningful play experiences take place.

So next time you plan a session, ask yourself one simple question:

Am I planning activities for children, or am I creating opportunities for children to play?

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