

Children's Play, Principles and Practice

Section 1

Defined by the Oxford dictionary as the engagement in an activity for enjoyment (Lexico, 2019a), play has a profound impact on a child's development (Family Lives, 2018). Play is deemed so important to children that the United Nations (UN) included a right to play, specifically Article 31, when it ratified a child-specific human rights treaty called the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Save The Children, 2016). It is essential to a child's cognitive, social, physical and emotional development and presents an optimal opportunity for parents to engage with their children (Ginsburg, 2007, p.182). Through play, children learn about themselves, the world and the people around them. Play aids in the development of a child's mental well-being, allowing them to become resilient, gain confidence and self-esteem and the ability to cope with challenging situations (NI Direct, 2018). Play also offers great benefit to children's physical well-being, helping to improve overall physical fitness, agility, stamina, co-ordination and balance. Ginsburg (2007, p.187) explains that although play can certainly be monitored for safety, the majority of play should be self-directed rather than adult directed.

Self-directed play occurs most often when children use simple toys in creative ways with the absence of adult-direction. Although there are typically pre-conceived notions that there should always be a specific learning outcome when children undertake an activity, there is no "right" way to play when it is self-directed, and often occurs without a specific outcome needed (Hollis Montessori School, 2018). When children take part in self-directed play they learn independence, acquire problem solving skills and experience the joy of self-discovery (Be Active Kids, 2015) which the National Literacy Trust (2017) believes is important as it allows children the environment they need to grow as human beings. Self-directed play is at the heart of the Montessori approach to learning.

Montessori is a method of education that is based on self-directed activity, hands-on learning and collaborative play. In Montessori classrooms children make creative choices in their learning, while the classroom and the highly trained teacher offer age-appropriate activities to guide the process. Children work in groups and individually to discover and explore knowledge of the world and to develop their maximum potential (Montessori Northwest, 2010).

Montessori schools aim to facilitate the growth of independence, task persistence and self-direction. They also aim to develop a child's social skills through clear and respectful communication and, where necessary, safe and natural consequences. Montessori schools contain a wide variety of resources for the honing of sensory perception and endeavour to deepen the child's understanding of literacy and mathematics. Opportunities for self-expression and creative imagination are also abundant in Montessori schools (Montessori Northwest, 2010).

Howard and McInnes (2012) conducted a study with 129 children between the ages of five and three. The children were separated into two separate activities; one activity deemed 'like play' and the other deemed 'not like play.' The 'like play' activity occurred on the floor, with a proximal adult and the child had a choice about their participation. The 'not like play' activity occurred at a table with a directly present adult, with the child being specifically asked to take part. The results of the study concluded that children were more inclined to take part in an activity when they perceived it as play. With this in mind, it is imperative that practitioners and parents alike facilitate activities that children can perceive as fun and 'like play' to maximise the potential of their learning and emotional wellbeing.

There are different types of play with varying advantages and areas of development. Social Play, as the name suggests, aids in the development of a child's social skills, allowing for shared creation utilising teamwork (Play Scotland, 2018). Creative Play occurs naturally when children are left with a miscellany of household items, wherein they will use these items as substitutes of real items, often pretending to 'work' or pretending to complete a task (British Council, 2019).

Rough and Tumble Play is described by Play Scotland (2018) as a close encounter play type that typically includes touching, tickling and gauging relative strength rather than actual fighting – a view shared by Bilton (2010) and Moyles (2010), who both agree that children can confidently differentiate between aggressive and play fighting. Lindon (2001) describes Rough and Tumble play as being obviously enjoyed by children, noting it is a physical play in which children can play energetically with their peers and often with an adult. According to Moyles (2010), Rough and Tumble play often takes on the form of games such as 'touch' or 'tag' when occurring on the playground in school settings. Rough and Tumble play is an innate human characteristic and that there is "a process to it." Bilton (2010) and Moyles (2010) are in concurrence once more by sharing the view that, armed with

the knowledge that Rough and Tumble play is not aggressive, early years practitioners need not ban this type of play from the playground – stating a lack of exposure to this play type can lead to under-developed social competencies which can affect children when they reach adolescence and adulthood. It is believed that Rough and Tumble play aids in a child's holistic development and is not limited to the growth of their social skills.

Section 2

The Oxford Dictionary defines Risk as “a situation involving exposure to danger” (Lexico, 2019b). Risk is often cited as something to avoid where children are concerned and, while there are many situations and instances where risk is detrimental to a child's welfare, it is important to remember that children need to be exposed to a certain amount of risk in order to facilitate holistic growth. Creating controlled risk environments for children in order to teach them how to be able to manage risk themselves and make sensible choices inevitably leads to them becoming safer (Council for Learning Outside the Classroom, 2019). Blincoe (2015) describes this growth as Risk Perception and says it is “like a muscle that needs to be developed and flexed.’ She also states that the outdoors is key when introducing children to appropriate risk. Situations such as poking around under hedges and allowing unsupervised time in the garden can lead to children experiencing minimal risk, but still allowing them the opportunity to develop their Risk Perception. Bilton (2010) holds a similar view, arguing that children should be encouraged to experience risk in order to understand their own capabilities. Play Wales (2016) state that exposing children to a measured amount of risk can help them to build up physical and emotional resilience as well as their confidence. Play Wales (2016) also provide instances and examples of how adults can support children and facilitate their risky play, like allowing children to figure out problems alone and keeping in mind that accidents do happen – and that it is not anything to worry too much about should children sustain minor injuries like bruises.

According to Heseltine (1998), the concern for physical safety in the playground has had a detrimental effect on things like adventure playgrounds – typically defined as such by an ethos of unrestricted play. This, he says, is due in no small part to media attention; the likes of which paint the picture of school playgrounds as inherently dangerous places. Because of this, parents are increasingly more reluctant to allow

their children to play in local playgrounds because they, often unfairly, deem them unsafe, despite the Royal Society for the prevention of Accidents confirming the accident record of adventure playgrounds is far better than those of other forms of provision (Heseltine, 1998).

It is important for practitioners to be able to create emotionally and physically risky situations and environments for children, but also be mindful of when the risk becomes overwhelming. It is also important to get the balance right regarding risk and benefit; knowing when the risk outweighs the potential benefit for children. Gill (2016) notes that, in recent years, the development in risk benefit assessment have been the most optimal way to achieve this. This approach, supported by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), reminds practitioners and parents alike there needs to be an ever-present mindfulness about the extremity of the risks in any given activity. Lindon (2001) advocates for an optimal balance of risk and safety, stating that adults have a responsibility to ensure children's safety while also being responsible for facilitating a sufficiently challenging activity.

Casey (2010) suggests that a risk assessment is the ideal balance between the need to keep a child safe and the child's developmental need for risk. For practitioners, carrying out risk assessments in classrooms and similar settings can have two benefits. Firstly, it covers the practitioner and the institution in a legal sense; a risk assessment paper trail can provide evidence of a practitioner's findings in any given environment. Secondly, and most importantly, it allows the practitioner and the institution to gauge whether or not an environment provides appropriate risk levels for the children in their care. Risk assessments allow practitioners to identify potential dangers in any given area, who may be at risk, what existing controls are in place and what further actions are needed in order to facilitate an optimal learning environment.

Section 3

Observations play a key role in the everyday practice of early years settings. The main reasons of observing children are for practitioners to determine their academic strengths and weaknesses, and to identify any difficulties a child may be having.

Put simply observation is the practice of looking at and listening to children to find out how they are developing, what they like doing and what they are learning through their play and the experiences on offer. It is important that

parents and practitioners share what they know about these three things so that they can decide whether the child's development is at the expected stage, whether the resources such as toys and equipment are suitable for the child and to focus them on what to provide in future to support the child to develop new interests, learn new skills and acquire new knowledge (Early Years Matters, 2011).

Observations also help to identify and highlight if and when a child is exceeding expectations or has shown to have exceptional ability. Utilising different observation techniques allows practitioners to assess the progress a child has made and whether they may require opportunities to fortify their learning.

It is essential, when endeavouring to gain a holistic view of a child, that observations are carried out in both indoor and outdoor environments. Research has shown us that children may behave, and learn, differently when in an outdoor environment and it is important to make this known in the assessment process.

Wherever possible and appropriate, children should be encouraged to understand and acknowledge the development of their skills and be afforded the chance to comment on how they are finding their education and how they believe they are progressing in different activities. Discussion before, during and after an activity can help children to reflect on their own abilities.

A running record is a type of narrative or descriptive narrative observation method that provides an insight into a child's day-to-day development in almost real time (Michigan State University, 2008). It is detail specific and allows great insight into a specific child's behaviour, habits, temperament and sociability among other things. A running record, in a school setting, can be passed from class to class or teacher to teacher – or to whoever needs to know the day-to-day information of a particular child. A running record also helps to paint a vivid picture of the events that were recorded, either for a teacher wishing to recount a day's events or for a parent wanting an in-depth look into their child's day-to-day.

Running records are typically reserved for children that have been highlighted for needing additional support in the classroom. Keeping a running record on such a child is beneficial for the teaching staff to be able to fine tune activities to maximise the child's potential learning. They are rich in detail and focus on all behaviours.

This observation method does not come without sacrifice, however. To be able to keep a running record on a specific child requires a member of staff working on an almost one-to-one basis, focusing all of their attention on one child. This can prove difficult when there is only one teacher and one teaching assistant in a class of over thirty children. Dedicating a staff member to one single child, even for a short period of time, can have a detrimental secondary effect on the rest of the class.

Where other observation methods may suffer from looking into a specific aspect of a child's development, running records have the potential to give a fairly holistic view of a child, subject to the level of detail that the member of staff inputs.

Another observation method that can be used to assess children is a strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ). It is a brief screening questionnaire, existing in multiple forms to cater to the needs of different practitioners, but typically lends itself towards assessing behaviour in educational settings (Mentally Healthy Schools, 2018). It consists of two to three questionnaires that are filled out: one by the teacher, one by the child, dependant upon age, and one by the parent. Each questionnaire consists of twenty-five questions looking into five different aspects of a child's personality, including emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer relationship problems and social behaviour. Once the questionnaires are completed, they are scored to show the level of difficulty on a numerical scale (Oranga Tamariki, 2019).

The SDQ is useful to encourage dialogue between children's primary keyworkers and parents and even the children themselves. It also highlights differences between the perceptions of each party completing a questionnaire. Should each party score a particular trait similarly, a positive discourse can be shared, highlighting potential next steps and creating a positive plan for the future.

SDQs have the potential to cause hostility between two or more parties, however. If one party were to score a certain area considerably lower than the others, this may cause discomfort and resentment between either the parent and teacher, parent and child or potentially both.

Section 4

When carrying out observations on children in the early years, practitioners must consider whether child will hold an interest in a given activity. As discussed previously in the article by Howard and McInnes (2012), children that perceive an

activity as 'play like' tend to be more responsive and show a higher level of involvement as well as signs of a better emotional wellbeing. Conversely, children who are subjected to forced involvement in an activity typically tend to show lower levels of involvement and participation, and display a clear. Therefore, it is important to carry out a range of different assessments, in order to achieve a more holistic view of a child and their development.

A play-based assessment is an interaction with a child using play materials (Essex County Council, 2015). This is done with a view to attaining information about the child's current developmental level with regards to thinking, reasoning and general language. It also aims to achieve information regarding the adult's interactions, specifically which support a child's ability to learn – often referred to as mediation. The differences between standard assessments and play-based assessments are clear. Where a standard assessment has a pre-determined end goal, usually set by the adult, the goals of the play-based assessment change during the course of the activity. In play-based assessments, adults must typically interact with the child in order to raise the potential independence of the child, whereas standard assessments would have children carrying out an activity without any help. The main difference, however, between standard and play-based assessments comes when seeking to gain understanding of a child's skills. In a standard assessment the practitioner would typically attempt to discover the baseline skills of a child, in a play-based assessment, the practitioner would set out to discover a child's potential skills.

Assessing children's self-directed play offers possibly the most accurate insight into a child. We can observe the pace at which the child chooses to carry out an activity, discover their genuine likes and dislikes when interacting with objects of differing sensory stimuli and we can gauge how happy a particular activity makes them.

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