

Sensory play

According to BBC (No Date), Sensory play includes the stimulation of senses through different activities. These senses include sight, touch, hearing, smell or taste. These activities can be done from birth and can be beneficial through all ages. Sensory play supports children's holistic development.

BBC (No Date) highlights these benefits by stating that sensory play benefits a child's attention span as well as helps the child understand the world by using their senses.

Theorist Piaget supports this and argues that children go through four stages of development, the first one being the Sensorimotor stage. Piaget believed that babies learn about the world through their senses and physical activity (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, p. 29).

Additionally, Froebel believes that sensory play and first-hand experience is a tool for learning. Which is also supported by Maria Montessori who believed that children learn best through their senses (Gascoyne, 2011, pg. 7).

Furthermore, Action for Children (2022) claims that sensory play plays a significant role in children's development in numerous ways such as, helping children understand cause and effect, enhances memory and problem solving, develops hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills, supports language development and assists with emotional regulation.

Sensory Play can be supported all throughout practice by providing simpler resources such as sand, water, cooked foods and paint. All resources provide excellent learning opportunities for children. Children will learn that sand has different properties and changes texture when wet (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, p. 145).

Practitioners can provide materials such as sand buckets, spades, sticks to write with. They could also make a sand pit into a building site which encourages children's imaginative play (First Discovers, 2019).

Furthermore, Practitioners can provide large containers of water with materials like watering cans. They can also scent water by adding herbs and spices or food colouring, to stimulate a children's brain for a multi-sensory experience (Beeley, No Date).

Water play allows children to gain knowledge about water properties. For example, how things float and sink (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, p. 142).

Psychologist Jerome Bruner believes that activities should provide a combination of play and learning (GetEduca, 2016).

Practitioners can also use food to create sensory food education. According to Gov (No Date), exploring food captures children's curiosity and gives them a multi-sensory experience that enables them to discover new foods, textures and tastes. Gov (No Date) also argues that sensory food education promotes healthy eating and has developmental benefits such as speech and language, fine motor skills and confidence. Practitioners can use foods such as pastas, rice and potatoes.

Imaginative play

Imaginative play, also known as pretend play, role play and fantasy play, is where children act out various scenarios. It involves multiple perspectives and is a way of expressing both positive and negative emotions (Knisley, 2020).

According to Tassoni and Hucker (2005, p. 10), Pretend play involves children learning about the world around them and coming to terms with different aspects of daily life. Some children may play 'families' or 'schools' and other experiences they are familiar with. Fantasy play is where children may dress up and pretend to be something such as an astronaut, princess or dragon.

Several theorists such as Vygotsky and Piaget identified imaginative play as a contributor to a child's development (Keiki Early Learning, 2019) .

"Pretend play serves the child well for self-entertainment and for assimilating the complexities of the world. But it is also the foundation of a long-term incorporation and consolidation of a major human characteristic: our human imagination, our capacity through consciousness to form experiences into stories, to manipulate memory representations of our physical and social worlds into new scenarios" - Goldstein (1994, pg. 7).

Vygotsky supports this statement and claims that make-believe play involves children creating imaginary situations and acting different roles which plays a significant role in developing higher mental functions (Bodrova and J. Leong, 2015).

Imaginative play supports children's holistic development, for instance, their language development is encouraged as through imaginary play, children often imitate others. Consequently, they learn new words and make connections between spoken and written language (Scholastic, 2021).

Children's social and emotional development is also encouraged. Imaginative play helps a child learn who they are as an individual. During role play, children have to agree on a topic and decide who is acting in what role which requires children to understand others and co-operate. Additionally, Imaginative play encourages freedom, self-confidence and builds their self esteem (Homan, 2016).

Imaginative Play can be supported in practice in numerous ways. Practitioners can firstly, feed their fantasy and go along with their role play.

Practitioners can also provide resources like toy kitchens, dress up boxes and other toys that can be used during children's play.

Additionally, Practitioners can read to children as a way of encouraging imaginative play.

Reading stories introduces new worlds and characters to children (Pampers, 2022).

The importance of self-directed play and the role of the adult

Self-directed play, also known as free play and spontaneous play, is defined as play that is entirely motivated by the child. The child acts without prompting or intervention by an adult. The type of play and duration is completely decided by the child (Sheridan, 2006, pg. 4).

Unicef (No Date), emphasises the importance of free play and states that children can express themselves creatively in free play. Free play encourages children to use their imagination and can promote skills such as problem solving and independence.

Ni Direct Government Services (No Date) supports this and claims that through play, children learn about the world and themselves. It improves children's holistic development. Specifically skills such as confidence, resilience and curiosity.

Theorist Froebel points out how important it is for children to learn freely, without the pressures from adults (EarlyEducation, 2021).

In contrast, theorist Maria Montessori did not believe in free play or children developing their own ideas. Montessori claimed that play needed to have a learning focus and should be structured (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, p. 21).

Similarly, free play may cause controversy. Some children may choose to play with toy guns and swords during their free play. According to Kiger (2017) some people believe that playing with toy guns and swords lead to violence and so adults should always have some sort of input on the child's play.

Ultimately, As stated in the UNCRC, Article 31, Every child has the right to play (UNICEF, 2019).

Moreover, Adults can support a child's free play by extending their opportunities.

Adults can learn the skill of supporting free play without heavily interrupting it. For instance, a child may be playing with a doll pretending to be its nurse or doctor. Adults can help extend this play by suggesting they pretend to visit the nurse. (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, p. 5).

Vygotsky supported this and claimed that adults should support children during play to help develop their ideas and thinking through play (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, p. 31).

The role of the adult is significant in early years development. Psychologist Jerome Bruner believed that children need active support from teachers and other adults to learn new concepts. It is important for teachers to provide opportunities for children to continuously learn new things (TeachThought, 2014).

Bruner also claimed that the experiences that the adult provides for the child is important. The adult should judge what the child needs in order to develop (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, p. 31).

Furthermore, adults can provide support for children by enabling environments. Call and Featherstone (2003, pg. 62), emphasises the importance of the environment and states that adults should create a secure environment for children to move freely. Ideally, giving them space to play and work between indoor and outdoor areas. Resources within the environment should be organised and easily accessed.

The Reggio Emilia approach agrees with this statement and states that the environment is essential for children's development. Outdoor spaces are just as significant as indoor spaces. It should be an open, stimulating environment that encourages children to explore without being interrupted. The Reggio Emilia approach also claims that adults should only observe children

and allow them to play freely without any direction. This gives children the opportunity to learn independently whilst finding solutions to mistakes (TheScotsCollege, 2017).

Central to this analysis is the importance of adults enabling environments and recognising that outdoor environments are equally as important as indoor environments. Some theorists even believe that outdoor environments are more important. To illustrate this point one might refer to Margaret McMillian who recognised that children could learn a lot from the natural environment (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, p. 23) and Froebel who claimed that children should experience all aspects of nature by learning and playing outdoors. Ultimately teaching children real life experiences and encourages thoughts about things like sustainability and climate change (Froebel Trust, 2022).

Some curriculums over the world demonstrate this and formed approaches based on the roots of Froebel's work. For instance, in Copenhagen and Denmark there are 'forest kindergartens' where children learn and play everyday outdoors, all year round (Williams-Sieghfredsen, No Date).

On the other hand, Some countries such as Germany demonstrate the Waldorf approach. This approach is more classroom based and focuses on academics, art, music, physical education, social education and emotional education (Konen, No Date).

Observation methods

There are multiple different observation methods and teachers can generally choose what method to use based on class size and preference (ComplexNeeds, No Date), however according to Gov (No Date), it is essential in practice.

Gov (No Date) goes on to state that by observing children, practitioners can plan an appropriate curriculum based on the child's individual needs and monitor the child's strengths, weaknesses and progress. By using observation methods evidence of the child's needs and progress is kept. Practitioners can use scale based observations or individual child observations.

One scale based observation is the Leuven scale. This scale is based on emotional well-being as opposed to an academic scale and is used in the EYFS framework. It is a 5 point scale that allows practitioners to measure and document a child's emotional well-being (Arnerich, 2023). The main idea of the Leuven scale is to support children's learning development by prioritising and supporting their emotional well-being. It is generally believed that if a child feels confident, comfortable and happy in their surroundings, they are more likely to want to learn and develop. The 5 points to the Leuven scale starts at point 1 which is scaled as the lowest emotional state of the child. Point 5 being the highest stage of the emotional well-being scale.

The Leuven scale also documents how involved the child is. Again with a 5 point scale, point 1 being the lowest level of engagement. If the child is scaled at this point they tend to be bored, have a lack of energy and have an unwillingness to involve in new activities. Point 5 however, scales the child as intensely engaged with a lot of enthusiasm (Learning Journals, No Date).

According to Learning Journals (No Date), The Leuven has disadvantages. For instance, It is hard to use for a child with special needs or disabilities. In non-verbal children especially, documenting well-being and involvement can be difficult as behaviours are not as obvious. ANother notable criticism is similar to the criticisms of John Bowlby's Attachment Theory in that it is believed that each culture possesses different and unique traits and behaviours (Jarrett, 2017). If there are cultural differences within practice, it may be difficult to generalise the Leuven scale to all children as behaviours and attitudes may be different due to culture.

Moreover, one individual child observation method is a learning journey tracker.

A learning journey tracker is an individual record of a child's learning and development.

Information is collected throughout the whole of the year, and kept as evidence.

The learning journey may include observations, screenshots of achievements, worksheets and quotes from the child, parents and teachers. Special moments are documented and children can take their learning journeys home at the end of it, which would be treasured by parents (Kelly, 2015).

According to Lancashire County Council (2014), a disadvantage of the learning journey tracker is that it is very time consuming. Teachers generally complete them during PPA time which takes away time from lesson planning. Sometimes staff even take them home and so they are hard to manage.

Comparing the learning journey to the Leuven scale, it is clear to conclude that the Leuven scale is a lot less time consuming and is a simple check box which can essentially be completed in minutes.

However, the learning journey trackers provide a lot more information and evidence, and focus' on their experience, achievements and progress as a whole. Whereas the Leuven scale focuses purely on well-being and involvement.

Additionally, the learning journey trackers can be taken home to parents and they are generally a lot visually nicer to look at. According to Nursery Resources (2018), learning journey trackers are full of observation sticky notes, photographs, samples of work and home sections. Which makes it a lot more memorable and more of a keepsake.

Nevertheless, if a practice does not have enough staff and time, completing the learning journey will be a challenge.

The role of play during observations

Practitioners are required to observe children, make assessments and plan a curriculum based on every child's needs and goals. Practitioners must track their progress and keep it as evidence through EYFS.

The key to observing children is by watching what they do without giving them any sort of direction. Practitioners should also try to interact as little as possible. Children need to behave and act the way they would naturally without any sort of guidance (Toucan Learn, No Date).

Practitioners can observe children when they play. This is beneficial for many reasons. Including, the discovery of how children respond to activities, what skills have been learned and are being developed, how easily children interact with each other and to evaluate the effectiveness of the environment (Kelly, 2016).

The environment plays a key role in supporting a child's development. By evaluating the effectiveness of the environment, practitioners can make necessary adjustments to extend a child's learning. In the EYFS the environment is described based on three factors; the emotional environment, the outdoor environment and the indoor environment. All three aspects should be enabling and encouraging play and learning (Early Years Matters, 2007).

Furthermore, practitioners can observe children through play by learning, understanding and following the play cycle. The play cycle is used to understand play better and how adults can support play better. By supporting play, children have the best opportunities and it can give more accurate observations.

The play cycle involves six stages. The first stage is metaludes. At this stage the child is contemplating where to go and what to play with. Practitioners could ensure the space is stimulating and give children multiple choices that will spark the metalude.

The second stage is play cues. Play cues can involve eye contact, gestures, body language or verbal invitations that suggest a child would like to play with something or someone.

The next stage is the frames. This stage is initiated by the child. The environment gets manipulated by the child.

Moreover, the next stage is called flow. This is the response to a frame and their play can progress here. Finally, the last stage is annihilation. This is where the play naturally ends and the child moves on (Oxfordshire Gov, No Date).

If the adult becomes involved in the play cycle, the adult can disrupt it and break the cycle.

If practitioners are observing children during play, it is important to not get too heavily involved. Adults may disrupt the play cycle by issuing too many play cues. The adult may then direct the play too much which may stop the child from responding. If the child is being observed and the adult breaks the play cycle, the child will not be acting and responding naturally. Consequently, any observations being made will not be completely accurate. The child must be engaged the whole time in order to get a clear observation.

The play cycle in early years is important as it helps practitioners understand play better and gives practitioners ways to support play better. By following the play cycle, adults can use their knowledge to try and ensure they are not being disruptive (Tom, 2022).

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