

'Play is not static, but fluid, evolving as it flows across time and through space' (Tovey, 2007). Tovey (2007) indicates play is hard to pin down and is an elusive concept. It is a word defining a large number of very different but interrelated activities. Bottrill (2022) believes play '...should be open-ended, give opportunities for self-chosen challenges, offer limitless possibilities and endless interpretations' and that the importance of play should never be under-estimated, it is vital to every child.

Furthermore, Howard, (2009), Howard and McInnes (2013) and Saracho (1990), claim that play means something different to different people at different times. According to Early Years Matters, play through an enabling environment underpins the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) including learning and children's holistic development. Children develop their emotions, language skills, intellectual skills, social and creativity skills through play, which can be indoors or outdoors. Both Bottrill (2022) and Welsh Government (2021) state that children need the opportunity to play to give them the foundations to grow into enterprising, caring and creative contributors, whilst being ethically and informed citizens, healthy and confident individuals and ambitious and capable learners. Similarly, Whitbread (2012) agrees that providing children with the opportunities and support to play is critical to their holistic development supported by Bruce (2013) who claims play is the highest form of learning in early childhood. Johnston et al (2018) mentions how Froebel considered every child to lead by their own interests through self-directed activity and play. Ephgrave (2020) supports this, promoting child-initiated play. Early Years Matters maintain that play is important to children both indoors and outdoors so that children are able to explore and discover their immediate world whilst practising new ideas and skills, experience risk-taking, problem-solving and use their own ideas.

Article 31 the right to play, is enshrined in Welsh law through the Rights of Children and Young persons (Wales) Measure (2011). Welsh Government (2014) believe that play is a fundamental and integral part of the healthy development of children. It should be freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. Through the Play Sufficiency Duty, assessments are made by all local authorities in Wales to

ensure provision is made for secure and sufficient play opportunities throughout Wales.

Outdoor play is important in children's holistic development. The EYFS and Ephgrave (2020) believe there are many learning opportunities in all areas of development through outdoor play. Flood & Hardy (2013), state that Vygotsky believed children of different ages and abilities learn effectively from each other. Bottrill (2022) encourages outdoor play such as areas to include the mud kitchen, water, sand, gravel pit, digging pits, garden plots, obstacle course, dens and rules. Outdoor play offers the ideal place to learn about the natural world, experience the weather, take risks, develop personal and social skills, spatial awareness and self-regulation, to be independent, learn to negotiate, assess dangers and develop communication and language as well as gross motor skills. According to Article 12 of the UNCRC children have the right to make decisions about taking risks considering their own skills. MacLeod-Brudenell (2004) points out that McMillan's emphasis on outdoor play was a precursor of practice today.

Both Tovey (2007) and Wilson (2012) agree that outdoor play is important and children look for adventure and challenges whilst exploring and transforming spaces that are in their imaginary worlds. Indeed, Kamp (2015) and Canning (2013) acknowledge that den making has been a popular play activity with children of all ages whilst developing their creative problem-solving skills and imagination. According to Engelen et al (2013) and Yavuz (2016) loose parts such as wooden planks and crates encourage play, collaboration, imaginative play and concentration. Howard and McInnes (2013) state how practitioners need to be aware that children will associate where, when and with whom they take part in activities and that they learn to distinguish play from other experiences so the adults need to ensure play of a certain type is not restricted to a certain area or time. When children are in control of their own play they get more holistic learning from it.

Another play type is construction play. Indeed, one of the five categories of play that Macyntyre (2012) discusses based on the cognitive development theory by Piaget is constructive play. It is described as children actively engaging with materials and objects that enhance their learning through play. Flood & Hardy (2013) suggest this type of play can be carried out with manufactured or non-manufactured materials.

Recently construction play tends to be encouraged with the use of more natural, non-manufactured materials (Ephgrave, 2020). Ephgrave (2020) suggests encouraging books in all areas such as books next to the construction area about bridges as well as having the materials accessible to the children. Flood & Hardy (2013) discuss materials such as LEGO and K'nex as well as boxes, kitchen rolls, pieces of wood, nails and natural materials. Children can talk to the adults about what they are making and develop ideas from them, but it is important that the adult does not take over the ideas of the child. Flood and Hardy (2013) state that Froebel believed each area of development for a child can be promoted through play and encouraged the use of natural materials in play to make constructions such as wood to make huts.

Section 2

Flood and Hardy (2013) maintain that the two main roles of the adult in play are to provide the appropriate materials, equipment and resources and to support the children's holistic learning through scaffolding and extending their play. They suggest theorists such as Froebel and Steiner believe that simpler resources are more beneficial to children as they will make their own use of them as opposed to modern electronic items requiring just the press of a button. Lindon (2001) states that there are many roles of the adult during play including play partner, observer, admirer, facilitator, model, mediator and safety officer. Depending how the adult plays the role can influence whether children will be willing to allow the adult to join in their play in the future according to Howard(2002) and Howard & McInnes (2013). Howard (2017) points out that an adult participating in play as an equal with the child enables the child to feel valued and that the adult appreciates what the child is doing giving the child a feeling of control. Chappell *et al* (2008) suggests that the way adults question and speak to the child is important. McInnes *et al* (2013) agree, believing that using open-ended questions allow the child to share their thoughts and are opening the dialogue to the child to use as they wish. The child is more likely to accept the adult into play in the future, as they will feel valued.

The Principles of Play Work (Play Wales, 2021) underpin that the practitioner must ensure the play space is enhanced allowing opportunities for children to extend and develop through play. MacDonald (2022) states that according to Sturrock and Else

(1998) and King and Newstead (2020) the role of the practitioner is to support play through an enabling environment, which children can choose, control and engage in whilst understanding the Play Cycle. The Play Cycle shows how adult intervention can affect or disrupt play. It has six stages that are the pre-cue, the play cue, the play return, flow, the play frame and play annihilation. When the practitioner joins in through play maintenance, simple involvement, medial intervention and complex intervention can occur.

The Welsh Government Play Policy (2002) describes self-directed play as allowing the children to decide on their own roles and rules within their play according to Play Wales. It allows them to experience independence in a safe, prepared environment. Howard (2017) points out that Sheridan (1977) identified four provisions; playthings, play-space, playmates and playtime for the adult to provide the child to enable spontaneous play to support holistic development. An adult's playful interactions such as peek-a-boo with young children help them to explore the environment according to Milteer et al (2012). Jennings (2011) believes these interactions can start from before a child is born which has a strong effect on the brain development and affects attachment.

According to Bruce (2010) Steiner (1861-1925), Montessori (1869-1952) and Froebel (1782- 1852) agree that the adult must go with the ability of the child and allow the child to struggle and persevere if they encounter a difficulty. This will result in the child having a high-esteem and sense of well-being and achievement. Self-directed play builds self-confidence and independence in a safe environment. It stimulates their imagination and allows them to be creative whilst problem solving. They do this through setting up their own games with their own rules allowing them to feel successful. It also allows them move at their own pace, as adults are requiring a specific outcome. They can build on their own knowledge and understanding, allowing them to challenge themselves, try new ideas and enjoy having a go and experiencing their own success. Simple, if possible natural materials and loose parts such as pebbles, tree bark, boxes and buttons should be provided. These are open-ended allowing the children to take the lead and explore their own imagination in a safe environment. The child should take the lead, with the adult showing an interest. Bottrill (2022) agrees with this and states that the adult voice cannot be the child's

voice and rather than the adult planning set themes, a child-led approach should be adopted. Howard (2017) points out that Bruner (1960) challenged the idea of Piaget, that children needed to be at certain stages to learn, as he believed any concept could be introduced in some form to children at any time. Ephgrave (2018) emphasises how the enabling environment prepared by the adult should be consistent to enable the children to feel confident, as their environment is constant and predictable. They need to engage independently of the adults. The adult should go to the child and to the child's level, encouraging children to think outside of the box with divergent thinking and flexibility to enhance greater creativity in adult life (Russ & Wallace, 2013).

The EYFS maintains that the role of the adult is crucial during play providing time, space and appropriate resources including clothing, boxes and materials, which can encourage play and inspire children's imaginations. It is the role of the adult to observe play, join in when the child invites them and to watch and listen before intervening. To illustrate this point, Ephgrave (2020) states the adult should appreciate play whilst providing a safe, challenging environment to supports and extend the child's holistic development.

Section 3

Observations are important in the role of an early year's practitioner according to Hutchin (2007) and Ephgrave (2020). They are not about a tick-list, which the children are marked against depending on their achievement; they should be about the development of the individual child. The teaching happens in the moment it is needed and in a way that is uniquely suited to each child (Ephgrave 2020).

The Learning Journey, pioneered by Carr (2001) and more recently Ephgrave (2018), is a form of assessment observing the children through their self-directed play in their enabling environment allowing the children to play without feeling they watched and assessed. This gives a true picture of the child's holistic development as they are unaware they are being observed.

Each week a percentage of the children, get observed. It involves the parents completing a focus sheet on their child with photographs and useful information as to how they are doing at home, any important occasions, factors at home and anything the parents would like the setting to help the child. These factors can impact upon the child's way of thinking according to Keung and Cheung (2019).

Ephgrave (2020) suggests practitioners have a learning journey sheet for each focus child and all who interact with the child contribute to this learning journey. Children should be provided with an enabling environment and suitable resources. Then the practitioners step back and observe taking brief notes. Rekers and McCree state that practitioners need to step back and allow the children to play in order to see if they need support and help to develop their holistic development. This is critical for summative assessment, forward planning and reflective practice according to Waters-Davies (2022). If the child asks for help or the practitioner can see they need support, the practitioner may step in and help. This is noted as a teaching moment with the outcome recorded. The practitioner teaches in that moment when needed and ensures that the child's play is uninterrupted but their interactions used when needed.

According to Ephgrave (2020) observations start with the practitioner looking, listening and noting, followed by the practitioner analysing the observations and deciding what they say about the child. The practitioner can put experiences and opportunities into place with suitable resources enabling the environment for the development to happen. At the end of the week, the sheet should be filled with plenty of unique learning and development experiences, which are shared and discussed with the parents by giving them a copy with another in the child's file. These types of observations allow all practitioners to get to know the child and their needs rather than only the keyworker. As and when children do something independently these can be recorded as 'wow' moments to be shared with the parents and put in the child's learning journey. Ephgrave (2020) feels it is important for practitioners to realise that the vast majority of evidence from observing children is in their heads and not necessarily on paper as they get to know the children so well. According to Howard and McInnes (2013) observing children when they are playing and both

engaged and motivated demonstrates how play impacts on children's social, physical and cognitive skills and children are being seen as they actually are and a true reflection can be made. Vygotsky (1978) agrees with this also stating that children operate in play at their best. Children will move onto other activities when they are ready too and doing set up activities to observe does not necessarily give the correct results.

According to Sheridan (2017) diary and narrative methods of observation can be challenging as need accurate recall and recorded straight after the observation. Running methods need full notes written down as it happens, showing that the learning journey with short notes taken are recorded quickly and efficiently without any impact on the setting for time taken to record. However using the learning journey that Ephgrave (2020) suggests, the notes are brief and taken during the observation without the practitioner missing anything. According to Ephgrave (2018) using this type of observation can cover many areas of holistic development at a time depending on what the child is doing and as it is done when the child is happy and engaged playing, the practitioner has a true outcome of the holistic development of the child.

Section 4

According to Howard (2010) and Howard and Miles (2008) when children are playing they tend to lose their fear and have more flexible outcomes. This gives children the opportunities to have choice; freedom of who to play with, where to play and how to play, as well as to feel in control of the situation that in turn enables learning and can be observed by practitioners.

Children need to have a voice and the practitioner should respect this by standing back, watching and listening. A child cannot be observed effectively if the practitioner is talking and joining in. Bottrill (2022) suggests practitioners should stop, look and listen.

The practitioner must always ensure that the enabling environment is suitable for the children including the resources, other children and practitioners. Then children will

have the best opportunity to be able to play and learn according to King and Howard (2014) making the observations and assessments on the children fairer as the children will have the best opportunity. Offering children freedom and choice supports their emotional and intellectual growth according to Howard and McInnes (2013).

Howard & McInnes (2010) believe that in settings where there are more adult-child interactions during play the children will make a more play approach to learning leading to more learning achieved.

McInnes *et al* (2013) suggests that although adult presence should make play a learning experience, it can also be detrimental and children can change their way of playing because the adult is there. Adults need to wait for the child to give their cue for them to get involved and then consider how to respond so they support and enhance the child's play without taking over and ensuring children have the perception that the activity is play.

Smidt (2015) mentions that Piaget was interested in the impact of play in children's learning and how the children engage in schemas, stating how it is useful in understanding children during observations, which can help identify triggers.

The role of play when practitioners are undertaking observations and assessments is important and the practitioner can support this by offering an enabling environment with suitable resources. Play should be open-ended and the curiosity approach used to offer children open-ended play which should be uninterrupted by the practitioner. Ephgrave (2020) believes that children need the chance to develop in their own way and practitioners should be there to support the child when the child asks for it and not to interrupt or lead the child.

Bruce (2010) states that according to Froebel (1782-1852), Montessori (1869-1952) and Steiner (1861-1925), giving children first hand experiences through play in childhood encourages children to engage and learn. Bruner, Froebel and Piaget also believe this as well as the importance of the role of the practitioner according to

MacDonald (2022). When children engage, observations are more likely to be a true reflection. MacDonald (2022) also states how practitioners must wait for their 'cue' to join in from the child and to take the lead from the child ensuring they do not adulterate the play.

According to Welsh Government (2015), practitioners should offer challenges and choices to children during play, whilst acknowledging where they are within their holistic development and encouraging them to progress with their learning. This can be achieved by knowing the children well whilst also doing suitable observations on them to see what stages they are at and where they need to go to develop their skills further.

Siraj-Blatchford, *et al* (2002) also agrees that practitioners need to know the children well in order to help them progress with their learning. As stated by Ephgrave (2020) when a child they know well is being observed lots of what the practitioner sees and hears is not necessarily needed to be recorded on paper as the practitioner will retain it and use it for teaching moments.

The role of the practitioner is to be open-minded to what they may observe, rather than focussing on one development area. An activity such as a child playing in the home corner could have real-life experiences (cognitive), imaginative play (creative), cooking sequences (cognitive), putting dressing-up clothes on and off (physical), message writing (communication skills), talking to other children (communication) according to Bruce (2010). Bruce (2010) also states that a practitioner when taking observations should have a good knowledge of child development.

Observation and assessment skills are paramount for the play therapy process and appropriate referrals with play used as the language by which children can communicate, explore and resolve any problems during play therapy according to McMahon (2009).

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